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THE OPEN SECRET

By Oliver Onions

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THE OPEN SECRET

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BY

OLIVER ONIONS

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BOSTON AND NEW YORK
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1930

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'You may declare that I am a cynic . . . but politics is not a moral affair, it is deceit, cynicism, intrigue, fraud, violence, crime if you like . . . For that reason I cannot be a party to your fantastic scheme, which can be attempted and defended only by irresponsible persons.'

EDUARD BENÉS, *My War Memories.*

THE OPEN SECRET

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CHAPTER I

I

Among the educational systems that suffered a temporary set-back during the war must be reckoned the one that operates by means of cigarette-cards. These, it is hardly necessary to say, are the small pieces of pasteboard that serve as stiffeners to the ordinary packets of Virginia cigarettes. For all one knows, they began by being blank. Then it occurred to some one to make them a vehicle for the dissemination of knowledge. The point is, that somewhere about 1917, when the price of paper soared to eight pounds sterling a ton, not only did there go back to pulp all manner of obsolete histories and concordances and out-of-date law-books and tomes of sermons by Scottish divines. The pictures were withdrawn from the cigarette-packets also.

And the further point is that young Clarry Moss's education suffered accordingly.

As mere smoking, Clarry actually preferred Woodbines or any other of the five-in-a-packet sort. They cost twopence as against sixpence, and weight-for-weight probably worked out about the same. But these have always been pictureless. All the Woodbines in the world would not have told Clarry the markings of the Great Auk's Egg or anything at all about the

Nebulæ in Orion. And Clarry's thirst for tabloid information of this kind was unslakeable. Therefore, he cadged the pictures when he could, and when he couldn't, nobly spurred, he planked down his sixpence for the kind that throws in a bit of printed cardboard out of profits of seven-and-a-half million pounds a year. He would as soon have parted with a pint of his blood as with the sets that had to do with Motor-Bicycles and Types of Locomotives. League Footballers and the Characters of Dickens, Botany, Zoölogy, and the Movements of the Celestial Bodies — their names and completion-numbers were on the tip of his tongue. But he sometimes looked wistfully at the Arms of the Public Schools and Colleges, that have words like 'or' and 'gules' on the back. Strike-a-light, what a lot them blokes must know!

In this and similar ways Clarry had been picking up his education ever since he was eight years old. To be exact, precisely on his eighth birthday he had walked into a Liverpool fishmonger's shop and had asked for a part-time job. They have views of their own on education and the humanities in Liverpool. Clarry had been given a duster and set to wipe dry the large block of ice at the foot of which the lobsters reposed. When he had finished that, he might solve the conundrum of how whiting manage to swim in a straight line with their tails in their mouths. And so on and so on, until, the facetious preliminaries over, he really had been given a job. At about that time he might have been seen, in an apron of dark blue with white horizontal stripes, performing remarkable feats of balance on a two-wheeled cart, driving standing up like Ben-Hur, and taking Liverpool's corners at terrifying speeds and angles.

But many blocks of ice had melted on the fishmonger's slab since then. Clarry was now close on twenty, bookish — that is to say, cardish — and in a position to inform the whole of Billingsgate Market if necessary that water from four degrees Centigrade to freezing-point expands, which is the reason why water-pipes burst in the winter. Furthermore, he was travelled. London and the newspaper-selling business had claimed him, tiring of which, and yearning to drive a taxi, he might have been found at street-corners, hearing and asking his acquaintance such snorters as the most direct way to Sidney Street, E., or the hours of the Wandsworth Hospital for out-patients.

But it was for street-betting that he became acquainted with the inside of a Borstal Institution.

This, then, was Clarry Moss — poised, on his own, and especially quick to see a policeman before the policeman saw him. In appearance he would have been rather attractive had his low-growing shock of hair been oftener cut and the nails of his small supple hands gone out of their half-mourning. His eyes were bright and the whites of them clear. Because he intended to rise in the world, he wore a soft collar, and none of your wisps of neckcloth that show bare throat below and above. And before we meet him again presently, let it be understood that he was very far from always calling himself Clarry Moss.

Now for Halsey Vibart and his education.

His uncle, running down to Eton one week-end in the summer of 1911 and fetching him out to a crowded lunch at the White Hart, had admitted a certain external improvement in him. He was eighteen, and it was quite possible that he had a girl. His white tie was not too bad, and when he took his smudged topper off, his bright hair ran back in a sort of steep cross-tide of diagonal ripples. But he hadn't set the Thames on fire at Windsor Bridge, and it wasn't very likely that Isis or Cam would break into flames on his account. Indeed, the young man himself had quite abjectly deplored his lack of the more scholastic sort of brain.

'So it rather looks like the business for me, I'm afraid,' he had modestly concluded.

An 'Eh?' had come from his uncle, who was a picture of silver hair and pink golfing complexion and admirable dentistry. 'So that's your idea of business — something that doesn't need any brains?'

'Well, I mean there's Norway or Canada or Russia or somewhere ——' The firm of Vibart Sons & Co., Timber Importers, had ramifications in all these places.

'On a remittance?'

'Oh, I'd work all right, and there's only me for it when you get into the sere and yellow.'

'Into the what?... Anyway, finish this half out and we'll see about it. Are you allowed to have a glass of port here?'

So at the end of the half, into the family business young Halsey had gone.

But only a year or two later, Percy Vibart had greeted his nephew, freshly back from Canada, in a darkened Euston Station. The boat was four days late, the blinds of the railway carriages were closely drawn, and there was much khaki about. Percy, first glancing over his shoulder, had spoken in a half whisper.

'Is it true Russian divisions are coming through?' he had asked.

'I haven't seen any. I've been nearly two months on the way.'

'Well, old fellow, we hardly expected this. But it can't last very long. People won't stand it. The best opinion says over in the spring. And, of course, the firm will go on paying you while you're away. Any idea what you're going to join yet?'

But it had lasted long enough to shake the firm of Vibart Sons & Co. to its foundations, and Halsey, home and demobilized again, had been packed off in haste to Russia, to see what could be pulled out of the fire. It had not proved a particularly fortunate mission, and on his return Hal had pondered it to soft *obbligatos* on his flute. The flute is the most meditative of all musical instruments. It draws the face to lines of gentle gravity, and some lack of edge in its turtle note attunes the mind to a dispassionate consideration of things. He couldn't go on living on the crippled firm. He wanted, if possible, a job that would take him out-of-doors. With Percy's help he found it, months and months before he became aware of the existence of such a person as Clarry Moss. And as the coming together of these two was the result of a series of accidents so unlikely ever to have happened that they bear on the face of them the stamp of truth, let us return for a moment to Clarry, joining him as he walked one March evening from Earl's Court in the direction of Gloucester Road.

On his left ran the mud-spattered hoarding of the Metropolitan Cutting, and ahead of him were two girls, one of whom looked perhaps taller than she was by reason of the exceeding stumpiness of her companion. Now Clarry had a working knowledge of girls. He knew them at area-railings and tradesmen's entrances, where the milk-cans are put out and the butcher's book drops through the slot with a thud. Sometimes he was approached by people who wanted to know (say) the date of a family's departure for a holiday or the hour at which a householder went to bed, and girls were frequently in a position to give such information. He quickened his steps. He drew level with the girls and placed an arm about the waist of each of them.

It was the stumpy girl who wanted to know who he supposed he was, Landru or the Shah of Persia or what — for at the time of these events the sheikh and the cave-man were still a year or two below the horizon. She freed herself from his arm. But the other girl allowed Clarry's arm to remain. She looked straight before her, while Clarry proceeded to enter into conversation.

'Bet you a bob I know where *you* work!' he challenged.

'Free with your bobs, ain't you?' said the shorter girl. 'Bet you you don't.'

'Bet you I do. You work at the Lillie Laundry.' For the faint odour, not of black-lead or metal-polish, but of soap and ironing, had met his nostrils.

'I wondered who the ugly object was hanging about. And what's your name when you're at home?'

'Freddy Hall,' said Clarry. 'Going to return the compliment?'

After suitable exchanges the compliment was returned — Miss Freda Horrocks for the stumpy girl, Miss Lottie Smith for the girl who did not speak; and if Clarry didn't believe either name was the real one, that was merely an error on the side of prudence. Only mugs told their names. Keep your name to yourself; don't tell people where you live; never say who you know and who you don't know; that is the triple armour to keep you out of trouble, and an astonishing number of people Clarry knew wore it.

On the following evening, he met the girls again in the same place, this time accompanied by a friend; for it was not the dumpy Miss Horrocks on whom his fancy had alighted. And so on the night after that, and on subsequent nights. And now he was asking himself what about it. Finding was all very well, but not when it meant keeping too. He was getting much too fond of the feel of the soft inside of her upper arm, and her hair had a scent of its own over and above that of the laundry. She was pale, even to her lips, with bluntly pretty features, and it added to Clarry's sense of possessiveness that she was an inch and a half taller than himself. But either she was phlegmatic or she had something on her mind. Even when she let him kiss her, the dark eyes looked straight past him, as if half of her was in one place and the other half in another. And then one night, in the dark entry of a mews, she told him that on the following night she couldn't come at all. Clarry wasn't used to this. But for her timidity, he would have thought she was beginning to take things for granted.

'Ho! And what might the game be?' he demanded.

'I've got to go somewhere.'

'And where have you got to go?'

She glanced nervously past the arch, for footsteps were heard. They had died away again before she replied.

'Up Holborn way.'

'Where up Holborn way?'

'Lamb's ——' she began, and then winced.

'Lamb's Conduit Street?'

She was mute.

'Lamb's Conduit Street? What to do there?'

'I — I've got to see somebody.'

'Ho!' challenged the truculent lover. 'Meaning as I'm to mind my own interference?'

Tremulously she answered, 'Yes.'

'Ho!' He took her arm as if she had been going there and then. 'Then, you see here. I'm coming with you. Got it?'

'No — no, no!' she cried in sudden alarm, trying to push him away.

But he had got out of her the name of a street, and a few minutes later had the number of a house also. From his studies of London streets he would not have said that a number so high existed in Lamb's Conduit Street, but that was an added reason for making sure. If she was trying any of her games on — another bloke or anything like that ——

So it was that a laundry girl and an address in a Holborn slum brought Halsey Vibart and Clarry Moss yet a step nearer together.

It was cheerless and chill and coming on to rain as Clarry crossed the road by the Holborn Restaurant and turned east. He walked up Red Lion Street and across Theobald's Road. There Lamb's Conduit Street was, with the last of the shutters being put up and a few pedestrians hurrying home. And there sure enough was the number she had given him, to witness if she lied.

But what conceivable business could bring her here? Clarry stood looking at as dingy and disreputable a frontage as he had ever seen. The house-wreckers might have been going to start work on it to-morrow. Its windows were closely boarded and nailed up. A shop that sold medicines and trusses flanked it on one side; on the other was a shabby news-agent's, where tobacco also was sold. Clarry looked at the planked-up windows again. Then he walked into the tobacconist's shop.

'Packet o' Players,' he said.

The card in the packet was a new one to him — 'Famous Highwaymen, No. 1, William Nevinson.' Among the Home Companions and Penny Horoscopes he stood reading the brief account of the desperado's career. Then he glanced up at the salesman, whose short grizzled beard and spectacle lenses showed round the screen of flyblown picture-postcards.

'Is it here the key of next door is?' he asked.

'No, it isn't,' the man replied with an unpleasant scowl.

'Anybody by the name of Smith there?'

'And who might *you* be? Can't you see it's empty?' The fellow certainly had a villainous eye.

'Thought there might be a job catching the rats,' said Clarry.

'You'll be catching something you don't want in a minute. You clear out of this ——'

'Not off of you I shan't.' Then, glancing at the clock over the shopkeeper's head, 'That's what *you* ought to be doing, Beezlebub.'

'What's what I ought to be doing?'

'Time,' said Clarry, and, first lighting one of the Players at the little gas-jet provided for the purpose, he tucked William Nevinson into his pocket and left the shop.

At about the same hour of that selfsame March evening, Halsey Vibart stood alone in Piccadilly, at a loose end. The three or four places he most commonly dined at when he was in town pulled him so equally that not one of them pulled him at all. It wasn't much of a night to be out in, and already the Morris had been standing half her allotted time in the parking-place in Saint James's Square. Why not cold tuck in his own place for once and a quiet croon into the flute afterwards? He moved across the Circus; opposite Appenrodt's window he stopped again. What was it to be? Herring salad? Potato? Liver sausage? Smoked salmon? Ham?... He entered the shop and made his selection, then walked back to Saint James's Square. He felt in his pocket for his parking-ticket. He failed to find it, but there the car was, his own property, with the attendant occupied at the southeast corner of the Square. Hal didn't trouble him. Putting his purchases into the car, he got in after them, touched the button, and was off.

Back across the Circus, up Shaftesbury Avenue and past the top of Kingsway he drove, as he had driven scores of times before. He had only as far as Bedford Row to go. The road was fairly clear, he wasn't doing more than twenty, and though the surface was wet, he didn't think he had skidded. But halfway along Holborn a light but marked jar seemed to run up his steering-column, and he found the wheel spinning uselessly in his hands.

His promptitude, instead of saving an accident, was actually the cause of a minor one. He heard a voice behind him loudly demanding to know what the hell he thought he was doing, the lorry he had just passed touched his tail, and at the same moment, as if a magic ring had been rubbed, a smallish youth of twenty or so seemed to bob up from nowhere.

Halsey was expostulating with the angry driver. What were you to do when your steering went, he wanted to know? You damned well looked after it instead of knocking other people about, the fellow retorted. He grumbled and growled. It was the likes of him that went through it, he said, not a lot o' blinking young toffs. Whereupon the smallish youth, who seemed to Hal to be of the upper-middle-street-corner type, interposed.

'Don't you give him nothing, guv'nor, he's only playing you up for a drink. You shut it, Horace, I'm a witness of what happened.' Then to Halsey again, 'There's a place up here; I'll give you a hand to shove her.'

The driver of the lorry mounted again and drove off. Together Halsey Vibart and the helpful stranger manœuvred the rudderless car up a narrow street that opened to a sort of square. Most of the buildings were in darkness, but a few illuminated windows made quadrilaterals towards the skyline. About the car's lights and a solitary street-lamp the drizzle showed spectrally. The youth had produced a flat electric torch from his pocket. With entire competence he placed himself in charge of the situation.

'There ain't any need for you to go spoiling your clothes,' he said cheerfully. 'And never you get copped without a torch, 'cos you never know when you mightn't want one. That chap wasn't hurt, he was just trying it on. Lucky you wasn't driving much faster. Let's have the key of your toolbox.'

Hal unlocked the toolbox, and the spanners clanked on the wet running-board. The youth chatted on.

'There ain't any traffic here. Featherstone Buildings it's called, and legal blokes and all sorts lives hereabouts. It's the base of your steering-column, that's what it is. You shine the light, and keep your clothes off of the mud ——'

Halsey watched the small grimy hands as they slacked off caps and locking-nuts, removed the ebonised wheel, exposed the race and bearings. The lights of passing traffic gleamed momentarily on windows over by the Holborn entrance, but nobody entered the little square. The rain fell more sharply, a quarter of an hour passed, twenty minutes. It was at the end of nearly half an hour that Halsey thought he heard a little exclamation.

'Found out what it is?' he asked.

The lad rose and straightened himself.

'Got far to go, guv'nor?'

'About five minutes from here. Bedford Row.'

'Do you want her again to-night?'

'No; I was putting her straight in, just behind Parkinsons' if you know it, the farm-machinery place.'

'It's what I said, your pin. You can't steer her to tow her. If you like to tell a cop, you could lock your tools up again and hide these things under the cushions and leave her here. I could bring you a new pin in the morning.'

Hal looked at the small figure, soaked and greasy under the lamp.

'What's your name?' he asked.

'Billy Taylor.'

'It's nearly nine o'clock. Have you had anything to eat?'

'No, guv'nor.'

'You'll want a clean-up, too. I think you'd better come round with me.'

'Right you are, guv'nor.'

Thus it was, by a series of accidents hall-marked as truth by their very fortuitousness, that these two came together.

II

A soft shuffle of papers met Halsey's feet as he pushed at his door and went in ahead of his guest, but as the postman seldom brought anything but circulars, he didn't trouble to look at them. He switched on the light.

'Afraid there won't be any hot water till the kettle boils,' he said, 'but you can get some of it off with cold. In there. Sing out if you want anything.'

He opened the door of the adjoining bedroom, and, setting a match to the fire, began to prepare supper.

His two rooms were at the very top of the building, part of the premises of a Commissioner for Oaths, whose sub-tenant Halsey was. The porcelain cone of the office light still ran up and down on a pulley over Halsey's gate-legged table, but a yellow shade had been draped over it, with black cats on it for luck, and on a low ottoman couch was a bright splash of coloured cushions. Somebody, possibly the young woman of the slapdash self-portrait by the mantelpiece, had evidently thought the place needed brightening up. The two Parisian cafè-scenes in charcoal were no doubt hers, too. The rest of the worn old furniture had come from his uncle's house, and Halsey, unpacking the cold tuck, holding up bottles of beer to the light, and glancing over his shoulder to see if the fire had caught, never looked at the place. It was left to his guest, returning from his toilet, to stand for a moment spellbound, staring at the red dahlia hue of the carpet, the upper spaces mellowed by the yellow lamp-shade, and the twinkling fire in between. Hal nodded to one of the large basket-chairs, and the chair, as Clarry's small figure became swallowed up in it, gave forth a sound as if he had sat down on a cat.

Already there were few things in the adjoining bedroom that Clarry had not taken stock of. Now, from the recesses of the armchair, and in a perfect agony of interest, he set about taking the measure of his host. All those things on his dressing-table, all those clothes in his drawers! Oh, he was a toff all right! He looked it, with his head set that way on his shoulders and his hair all in those crinkly little ripples. But you never knew! He'd been up to something! Accidents like *that* didn't happen for nothing! Lucky to be alive, that was what he was ——

In short, Clarry Moss could hardly keep his hand out of the pocket where the steering-pin of the Morris lay, neatly cut three parts through with a hacksaw before ever the accident had happened.

'Nearly ready,' said Hal, setting knives and forks. 'I was going to spend the evening at home anyway. You a mechanic by trade, Taylor?'

Clarry, guardedly watching him from the depths of the chair, answered, 'Off and on.'

'Out of a job?'

'I've got jobs offered me.'

'Well, pull your chair up. That's liver sausage and that's potato salad. There's red pepper if you like it, and those are gherkins. I say, I've never had steering go before. Beastly feeling. Hope that beer isn't too muddy — they were half-empty bottles — I must remember to get some more in to-morrow ——'

Clarry, busy as he was with his observations, was reminded of something he had learned from a cigarette-card.

'Beer-finings is made from the air-bladder of a sturgeon. They're isinglass,' he said.

'Eh? Oh! I mean, are they? Well, have some. Do you live near here?'

'Southampton Row,' said Clarry. You couldn't be too careful with these fellows who went and got their steering-pins sawn through.

'Do help yourself. I'm afraid this is all there is. You see, I'm only here week-ends. I'm all over the place the rest of the time.'

Clarry shot him a glance. 'What doing, guv'nor?'

'Pushing about trying to sell things to farmers. Parkinsons', in Holborn. I told you, I keep my 'bus there. Churns and separators and incubators and self-binders. It's the place with the self-binder in the window. I do the Home Counties for them. I used to be in the timber-business till the war hit us. But I say — hadn't you better have a cushion?'

He got up and reached two or three of the brightest from the couch. He tucked them about Clarry, raising him by some seven or eight inches.

Clarry had just caught sight of Halsey's hands and his own. True, he had been doing a messy job, and had only had cold water to wash in, but he wished he had spent another five minutes over them. He also vaguely wished he had not said his name was Taylor, for whatever he had been up to, this seemed a decent sort of bloke. But strike-a-light! A fellow had a chance to be decent when he had a red carpet on his floor, and a tin bath under his bed, and things like that on his dressing-table, and a shade with black cats on it, and a blow-out like this to come home to every night!

'What's your monicker, guv'nor?' he asked.

'Vibart. Halsey Vibart.'

'And these places you go to. Do you go in that Morris?'

'Practically live in her. Sometimes I come up to town in the middle of the week, but not often.'

'Have you come far in her to-day?'

'No. Only from the other side of Oxford.'

With that piece of metal burning a hole in his pocket, Clarry felt like bursting out, 'Oxford! She didn't do no Oxford with *that!*' But instead he asked his host where he had parked his car that day.

'I'd a drop of lunch in Henley and she stood outside. Then I shoved her into Saint James's Square for an hour. I'd just come away from there. Why?'

'Did you get a ticket for her?'

'I did, but I must have dropped it. I just took her out without. Why?'

But at this second 'Why?' Clarry decided that the subject of the car and its parking could wait. He was there to find out what he could, not to give reasons. Covertly he looked round the room again, not this time as at a place of luxury and rosy quiet, but as regarded its strategic position and advantages. Lumme (he told himself), a man could be dead a month there and nobody know! Four floors above the street. Here the inner door, there the door that gave on the head of the stairs. The bedroom this side, the window that, nothing but offices below, and everything locked up by six. He looked round for further evidences of crime, and found none: no sign of coining-apparatus, nothing to suggest that one of these gentleman-burglars lived here, unless that box on the mantelpiece had a blowpipe or a jemmy in it. And he didn't look the kind of cove who'd make enemies. But who'd taken his steering-pin out and put a doctored one in? For the pin was a new pin. What about that parking-ticket he said he'd lost? Had his pocket been picked, too? Had somebody taken that Morris away, and then brought it back again? What had the exact time been? Did the custodian know something? Clarry's mind boiled with questions. But one thing at a time. This Mr. Halsey Vibart had said he'd been coming from Oxford. That might throw some light on it.

'I've been to Oxford,' said Clarry. 'On a Daimler chassey. I expect you went to one of the Colleges there?'

'No. I was at Eton, but it would have been a waste of money to send me on anywhere.'

'I'm always Oxford on Boatrace days. I wouldn't have a bob on that Cambridge never. Is it at Eton they wear toppers?'

'Yes.'

'And bumstarvers?'

'That depends on your height,' said Halsey. 'You might have had to. The bigger fellows wear tails.'

'All the ache-em of the aristocracy goes to Eton, don't they?'

'The what? Oh!' It dawned on Halsey that his guest meant *acme*. 'Oh, I don't know. They get all sorts. Lots of Jews.'

'It's by Windsor, isn't it?'

'Just over the river.'

'At Windsor Castle,' said Clarry, 'the Standard's only flown when the Royal Family's in residence, and they only strike the Union Jack on the death of a Reigning Monarch. Castles of England Number One. Tell us some more about Eton, guv'nor.'

'What about it?'

'Anything.'

So Hal told him how you turned down the hill from Windsor Station, unless you happened to travel by the South-Western, and crossed the bridge by the boathouses, and you were in Eton. Along the High Street were tailors' and hosiers' shops, most of them with places in London too, and at the end were the college buildings and the Burning Bush. You were either a Colleger or an Oppidan, and you had a tutor, likewise a dame.

'Like Dame Clara Butt and Dame Ellen Terry?' the youth interposed; and by the time the subject of Eton was exhausted, his mind was a rich ferment, of a place where the ache-em of the land walked about all day in wedding-garments, which they only changed to rehearse on the playing-fields Waterloos to come, and the Jack on Windsor Castle wouldn't have been hauled down for the Prince of Wales himself.

Never in all his life had anybody talked to Clarry like this. He tried to tell himself how it had all come about. In the ordinary course of things he would have been with Lottie that evening. But Lottie had seemed to have some sort of a game on, and he had strolled out Holborn way to see what it might be. He had drawn a blank, but a bit later a car had gone suddenly wonky, and he had stopped to give a hand. And 'Strewth,' he had gasped on discovering what was the matter with it, and here this bloke was, evidently knowing no more about it than the babe unborn, talking to Clarry all about Eton, his job, himself. Ought he to tell him at once? But there was no hurry. Nothing could happen to-night, and in the morning Clarry would be round with a new pin. In the mean time, if that sawn-through bit of metal in his pocket could bring about these wondrous results, it was not iron, but gold.

'But the other was the life,' his host was saying, with a shake of his head. 'You haven't ever been in B.C., have you?'

'Where's that, boss?'

'British Columbia.'

'No,' said Clarry, who had been as far as Liverpool in the north and Borstal in the south, and Hal sighed lightly.

'I lost a fortune there. I mean I tried to make one and didn't. Want to make a fortune, Taylor?' he twinkled. 'Because it's still there, waiting for somebody.'

And Hal launched forth into his golden but vanished dream.

Spruce. Piano-spruce. Spruce for piano soundboards, grown at such-and-such an altitude, annular-ringed just so, properties of resonance tested at the National Physical Laboratory and passed second to none; indeed, only one other region in the whole world to be second to, and that clear-felled by the Boche the moment he got the chance.

'Roumania and B.C. Those are the only two places in the world where the proper stuff grows. And I tell you the Hun bagged the lot. It's a bit scattered where I was, a patch here and a patch there, but there's all you want of it. The waste would have come in for fiddles and things. I've got a few bits lying about somewhere — but let's clear the table first ——'

He rose, and did so, leaving the washing-up till later; he liked company, and hadn't very many visitors. A merry cloud of steam was coming from the kettle, and he filled the coffee jug and left it to stand. He got out his large atlas and opened it at the map of Western Canada. Finally, from the drawer of the table where he wrote his letters he took several planed samples and a magnifying-glass.

'There you are; that's the stuff,' he said, placing the blocks on the open atlas. 'And here' — his finger traced a track across the map — 'here's the very place where these bits grew.'

The light inside the yellow shade shone down on the two heads, the dusty mop of the street-boy, the gilded wavelets of the other.

Clarry was caught up into another world. Even Eton paled before this. This guv'nor had been to these places, seen these things! The things themselves, and not just the pictures of them published by the Imperial Tobacco Company of Great Britain and Ireland! Halsey handed him the magnifying-glass. With the point of his penknife he traced the silky minute markings. Through the lens they became a close-up, like the lady's eyebrows and teeth when he took Lottie to the pictures. 'Nineteen, twenty, twenty-one ——' he counted them with the point of the knife, nearly bursting with holding his breath. And on the map he read wondrous names, Frazer, Nechaco, Big Creek, Cascade.

'And were you there all on your lonesome, guv'nor?' he asked, awed.

Halsey laughed. 'Heavens, no. There were a dozen of us. Timber-cruising they call it; some men, too! Give 'em an axe or show 'em a timber-jam ——'

And he opened wholeheartedly out. He took Clarry into the solemn forests, showed him the headlong crashing rivers, told him, talking half to himself most of the time, about the hunting, the canoeing, the life of the camps. He spoke of trappers and half-breeds and the North-West Police, and told again the often-told story of the officer who brought the murderer single-handed through a thousand miles of mid-winter, cooking and eating with him and taking turn-about with him to watch. For a moment this was almost too much for Clarry. He lifted a suspicious eye.

'Do you mean he didn't try to escape?'

'There wasn't anywhere to escape to.'

'He didn't try to do him in while he was asleep?'

'That's what I'm telling you. He'd have been alone then. That's what it means to be lonely in a place like that. They had to have one another.'

Slowly it sank in, and there was a pause, while Clarry ruminated on the policeman's need of the murderer, the murderer's need of his captor.

'And there's another thing we used to do — not that I was ever much good at it myself ——'

Hal had gone again to the drawer from which he had taken the pieces of spruce. From it he fetched out a length of supple rope. He crossed over to the clear space by the couch and made a running bowline. With the bight of the rope held by his third finger, and a 'Lift your hand,' he caused the rope to skip like a live thing on the red carpet. Suddenly it leaped above his head and was describing a flat circle in the air. But hardly had Clarry's hand moved before the rope was about his wrist, and Clarry himself was sprawling half-way across the basket-chair.

'Christamercy!'

Then, in a passionate whisper as he picked himself up, 'Show us how to do it, guv'nor!'

And that of course was the ache-em of the evening. It was drawing on to eleven o'clock, and Clarry's home, far from being in Southampton Row, was in a villainous back alley off the Fulham Road. The rope put away again, from its case on the mantelpiece Halsey had taken his flute. The vague yet penetrating notes filled the apartment.

'Always carried the old flute about with me,' he half apologised. 'Used to play to the boys round the fire. Some days ——'

'What happened about the spruces, guv'nor?'

'Eh?' Halsey seemed to bring his mind back halfway across the world. 'Oh, the piano stuff. Nothing, worse luck. Rivers all in the wrong places. Nothing happened. But it's there. And I say. I've got to run over to our works at Willesden in the morning. Do you think you could have that pin round by nine o'clock?'

Clarry had no overcoat into which to be helped, and his cap had not left his pocket all the evening. His bright eyes were covetously on one of the smaller pieces of spruce.

'Could I have that one, guv'nor?' he begged ardently.

'Have what?'

'That with the what-you-may-call-it rings.'

Halsey yawned. 'Have the lot if you like. And I don't suppose that pin'll be more than a bob, but you'd better take half a dollar. You can give me the change in the morning.'

He descended the stairs with his young guest. Murky shoulders of shadow filled the staircase well, thrown up by the hall-light below, but Clarry's eyes picked out quite a number of the white-lettered names on the doors they passed. Bolts and bars and staples cumbered the lower door, but he saw that his guv'nor opened it by turning a single Yale knob. Nor did he shoot a bolt or hook a shackle behind him. The light inside the fanlight went out. Clarry stood on the pavement. The Arabian evening was over.

Suddenly, thirty yards away at the corner of the street, he saw the figure of a girl.

She paid off her course a little and quickened her pace, perhaps hearing Clarry's sudden step forward. But Clarry had stopped again as suddenly. There must be some mistake.

But you don't take a girl out night after night, and kiss her in archways while she looks straight past you, without knowing her shape and stature and walk. Especially when she wears a black-and-white check skirt. There was a Series about that, too. They chequered posts and sea-marks like that, for better night-visibility.

He remembered her agitated 'No, no!' when he had said he was coming with her.

Ho! So she *had* got a game on!

But he wasn't going to follow her. He knew a trick worth two of that. To have something up your sleeve that the other party didn't know you'd got — *that* was the way to get people where you wanted them ——

He turned towards Featherstone Buildings to have another look at that car.

III

Halsey Vibart was mistaken about the papers he had found inside his door being only circulars. Among them was a letter, with Vibart's oval embossing on the flap and an express-fee stamp in the corner. He read it, and then stood for some moments with it in his hand.

There was nothing in the least alarming about the contents of the letter. His Uncle Percy merely wanted him to meet him at lunch at the First Avenue on the following day. But Halsey still stood with the letter in his hand. Not only was it expressed; it bore the time of writing as well -- two-forty that same afternoon.

One dated letters as a matter of course, but it is only exceptionally that one times them. Posted in the ordinary way, it wouldn't have reached him till the morning. In a word, it savoured of urgency without actually expressing it. Halsey read it again, put it into his pocket, and prepared to wash up.

Then he remembered the ache-em of the aristocracy and the air-bladder of the sturgeon, and broke into a sudden laugh. The diversity of people, the things they said and did and the way they looked when they did and said them, always amused him. And yet, poor little beggar, there was nothing to laugh at really. The way he had walked into the liver-sausage, his eager questions about Eton! No doubt these two rooms had seemed as grand as the State Apartments to him. Hal looked round him again as he filled the enamelled bowl. Well, Audrey — she was merely his cousin, by the way — had managed to give the place a cosy look. He glanced at the self-portrait and wondered what she was up to now. Something scatter-brained, he supposed, or it wouldn't be Audrey. Then he saw his visitor's serious little face again, poring over the bits of spruce. He supposed he would have to give him five bob for his trouble in the morning. Lord, what a useless thing a car was when its steering went! Click went the plates, the greasy paper flared on the fire. Anyway, he had had quite an amusing evening.

But 'My Sunday Hat!' he exclaimed as he stood in his bedroom, looking at his basin, ringed with curded black, and at his towel, that would have left a smudge on a mudlark.

His last act of hospitality that night was to carry out the turbid inky leavings and to pour them away in the appropriate place.

'What am I to give you, Taylor?'

It was a quarter past nine on the following morning. The car was ready, the engine running. Clarry's small hands and girlish forearms were once more a rich oily mess.

'Nothing, guv'nor,' said Clarry.

'Rubbish. Shall we say five bob?'

There was a smudge on Clarry's cheek where his hand had passed, but nothing but earnestness in his light brown eyes.

'I wanted to talk to you about something, guv'nor. You ain't in all that hurry, are you?'

'Afraid I am, rather.'

'Can't I get in with you? You can drop me anywhere.'

'I have to take our manager along.'

'Could I see you somewhere after?'

Hang it, Halsey thought, that was the worst of giving people an inch. They always wanted an ell. If he'd anything to say, he'd had all last evening to say it in.

'After that I have to go out to lunch,' he replied briefly.

'To-night, then?' the youngster pleaded, and Halsey faced him.

'Look here, my young friend, I'm very much obliged to you and all that, and if you won't let me pay you, you won't, but I can't stop here talking to you all the morning. I've my work to do.'

'I come all the way from the Fulham Road ——'

'You said you lived in Southampton Row.'

'I'd ha' slept in that car to see she was all right, but they'd ha' pinched me ——'

Hal turned away. 'Thought as much. Always a mistake. I shall know better another time,' he muttered.

He slipped the car into gear and was off. Clarry watched the tail of the car turn out of Featherstone Buildings into Holborn.

Hal had Percy vaguely on his mind all the morning, but there was nothing at all ominous in his uncle's attire when Halsey met him in the lounge of the First Avenue at one o'clock. He was in festive plus-fours, and told his nephew that he was for Walton Heath. 'You got my note, I see,' he remarked, but said nothing about the timing and expressing of the letter. He led the way to the grill-room.

'Something simple for me,' he said, the bill-of-fare in his hand. 'I've managed to get seven pounds off, and it's no good taking it off to put it on again. You order what you like.'

'Well, how are things?' Hal asked.

By 'things' he meant things with Vibart Sons & Co., and his uncle had little favourable to report. In order to keep going at all, the firm was still buying back its own already-paid-for property, sometimes so unblushingly returned that not even the branded ends had been sawn off. Percy had certain things to say about Trade Credits and the wheels that revolve within wheels when Government protection for a private enterprise is invoked.

'And now,' he concluded, 'here are the sawyers wanting guaranties.'

Hal, cutting into his steak, looked up. 'Guaranties, what of?' he asked.

'They want their machinery guaranteed.'

Hal stared. He thought he knew the business, but this was a new one to him. 'What on earth against?' he asked.

Percy's handsome blue eyes within the black lashes seemed suddenly tired as he asked Hal a question in return. 'Ever seen the teeth ripped out of a saw?'

Hal put down his knife and fork. He had heard that sudden agonised shriek, as if an instrument had been plunged into a nerve, when the dreaming saw was awakened by the touch of something that should not have been there.

'What with?' he asked quickly.

Percy's answer accorded ill with the Saturday quiet of the grill-room and Gamages' just along Holborn and Chancery Lane with its settled and mellow law across the way.

'Machine-gun bullets,' he replied, and Hal leaned back, forgetting all about his lunch. Machine-gun bullets in Vibart's timber!

Presently his uncle went on.

'Calverts' showed me them. Four of them. Then they showed me the saws. This was about six weeks ago, and I didn't think very much of it. But last week it happened again.' Again Percy passed his hand over the handsome eyes. 'I wish they'd pick somebody else's trees to shoot people against.'

'I thought by your letter there was something,' said Hal, and Percy glanced round to see whether the waiter was within earshot. He leaned forward.

'You did, eh? Well, what did you think it was, for instance?'

'Hadn't the foggiest.'

'But I want you to try to remember. For example, just take your mind back to that Russian trip you took for us. You didn't get — *up* to anything while you were over there, did you?' And the blue eyes seemed to accuse Hal already.

'What do you mean?'

'Go about making yourself unpopular? Getting yourself disliked in any way?'

'Of course not.'

'Where did you go?'

'Riga and Petrograd. It was Petrograd, then.'

'Moscow?'

'No. What on earth should I go to Moscow for?'

'Who did you see?'

'I've forgotten now. You've got it all in the office. Holmes did the translating. I don't speak a word of Russian. It's all in the files.'

'Everything had — settled down by that time?'

'After the '17 show, you mean? Never heard a word about it. You don't suppose I went over there looking for trouble?'

But Percy persisted. He wanted to know what his nephew had done out of business hours — how he had amused himself in the evenings, for example?

What had he done in the evenings? Certainly nothing very heinous. In a still-disturbed country you didn't wander far from the beaten tracks when you couldn't even read the names of the streets. In Petrograd there had been a gipsy-fair sort of place across the water, and he had strolled about among its booths, dined under the trees, watched an al-fresco variety show. He had seen no pogroms, no shootings against trees.

'Women?' Percy asked laconically.

'My good chap,' Hal broke out, 'I tell you I don't know a word of the language. I never went near a woman. If Holmes wasn't there, I just pointed at things and waited till I got 'em. What's all this about?'

'This,' said Percy, and he took from his pocket and spread before Hal a sheet of foolscap paper, with a few lines of typewriting on it in faint violet, as if the ribbon had been badly worn. Hal took it up and read:

Communications if any isn't doing you any harm and the best thing for you and others to do is to stop interfering. Two lots has been stopped and it's known where your sympathies are. So shut your eyes in case of accidents. — X.

Halsey looked from the paper to his uncle's face and from his uncle's face to the paper again. Then he asked what it meant.

'How the devil should I know what it means?' Percy broke out. 'It's what I'm asking you. Damn it, I thought machine-gun bullets were the limit, and now this comes!'

'Where did it come from?'

'It was brought to the office during lunch-time yesterday. She gave it to Harrison and said I was to have it when I came in.'

'She? Who?'

'Some girl or other. Just mumbled I was to have it, Harrison says, and was off like a streak of light.'

'Can't he describe her?'

With that Percy exploded.

'Hang it, not even smart-looking! A shopgirl or skivvy or something, with cheap shoes and an old check skirt! If it had only been a good-looker — though I always think business is best kept apart — once they start calling at the office ——'

'But why should it have anything to do with me and Russia?'

'Because I've tried everything else I could think of. Not that I'm wasting a thought on the thing, mind you. I'm going to light a cigar with it in a few minutes. I wrote to you at once because you're such a difficult man to catch nowadays.' And he broke out again. 'Damn all foreigners! I always did say it and I always shall. Things used to be all right when the British Navy ran the show. The Two-Power Standard and you knew where you were. But nowadays, with your Tories as like Socialists as dammit — red tail wagging a blue dog all the time...' He sank back. 'I'll tell you what I'm going to do when I've got the firm on its feet again. I'm going to keep bees, my boy. Bees that live on other people's flowers, like your damned Labour people. Little place somewhere near a links, couple of acres, bit of glass, sensible housekeeper, and bees ——'

Halsey, studying the paper again, was wondering whether Percy was saying quite all he knew. He read the document again. '*Communications if any* ——' What communications? What interference? Anything to do with shipping is only private business to a very limited extent. Lloyds, the Port of London Authority, the Immigration people, all fling their invisible nets widely over it, and naturally an attempt is made now and then to penetrate the meshes — diamonds or cocaine, guns, spirits, essences, every woman with a pair of silk stockings or two. But Halsey didn't see where the talk of Socialists and the Two-Power Standard came in. He had never taken the faintest interest in politics. They — or it, he didn't even know the proper word — were something that happened at Westminster, bubbled up occasionally elsewhere in a bye-election, flooded the whole land for a week or two if the election happened to be a general one, and then ebbed back to Westminster again. As anything else — as a permeating thing, subtle and omnipresent as the air, that worked, fermented, crept through keyholes, sometimes escaped harmlessly and sometimes exploded violently under pressure, but rested neither day nor night and left neither high nor low untouched — he neither knew about these things nor wanted to know. He pushed the letter back.

'If I were you I should take it round to the nearest police-station,' he advised.

'Pooh! You don't suppose I attach any importance to it?'

'It ends up with something like a threat. Are you sure *you* haven't been up to something?'

'No, Hal. 'Pon my word, I haven't. But — but — well, you know what a queer lot you get hanging round the docks. And no country likes foreigners interfering in its domestic concerns. By the way, Holmes didn't strike you as being — a bit of an amateur that way?'

'No.'

'And nothing at all's happened to you?'

'No.'

'You can't throw any light whatever on it?'

'No.'

'In that case,' said Percy, rising, 'we may as well have coffee.'

They took coffee in the lounge, where Percy duly lighted his cigar with the letter. But Hal, watching him, wished he could get him away somewhere. The struggle with the firm was getting too much for him. That was a capital idea of his about the beekeeping. Bees in a hive that lived on other people's flowers were better than bees in the bonnet that wouldn't let a man sleep for thinking of machine-gun bullets and anonymous letters and the queer people who hung about the docks.

CHAPTER II

I

As a steam laundry the establishment in Earl's Court had only been in existence for a few years, but as a group of old Morland-like buildings it dated from the days, still within living memory, when Petersham House School stood where the shops in Gloucester Road now are, and thence to Hammersmith was nothing but lines of willows, footpathed fields and scattered farms. Earl's Court with its slums and squares, Baron's Court, the Metropolitan and its currings, the Exhibition with its once-famous Wheel, had all sprung up since.

You might have passed it without knowing it was there. Between an oilshop and a pawnshop there ran back an alley just wide enough to admit a delivery-van. At the bottom of the alley was the yard, and the noises of the street-market gave way to the wooden-sounding rumble of machinery and the throb of a Petter engine. It still remained quiet to the mind. Men had mounted horses from the stone steps outside the office, converted parlours and taprooms showed the sockets of old floor-timbers. By the engine-house an ancient walnut still put forth a leaf or two. The couple of dozen girls went in by a door with an old date over it. Entering, they turned the key of a modern clock with a red disc, and lateness was accused in red figures.

Lottie Smith moved between the washers and the wringers. She had changed into her oldest skirt and sleeveless blouse, and the humidity of the air caused the stubs of the sleeves to cling like a skin to that part of her arms that Clarry Moss so liked the feel of. There were four of the revolving cylinders to attend to. Lottie looked after two, Freda Horrocks after the other two. Next week she would be at the long calenders.

That is, if there was a next week, for twenty times that day the wild impulse had taken her to run away and hide herself where nobody would ever be able to find her. The knocking of the machinery and the rhythm of the engine had nearly driven her crazy. Freda's chatter had sometimes sounded loud in her ears, sometimes as if it came from a mile away. The masses of clothing had seemed now a featherweight in her arms, now a burden. Three times the cylinders revolved this way, three times that, over and over again. 'A *Num*-ber, a *Num*-ber, a *Num*-ber!' their wet thud and swish seemed to say, and again, 'A *Num*-ber, a *Num*-ber, a *Num*-ber!' as if there was no escape from it whichever way they went round. The clothes that entered the drying-closet down the room seemed a procession of journeying wraiths that moved on one another's heels into an endless tunnel. It was not yet time for lighting up. The sorting-girls brought up the wooden trucks, wheeled away the empties. Bump-bump, went the shafting, 'A *Num*-ber, a *Num*-ber, a *Num*-ber!' the washers endlessly groaned.

And Freda talked incessantly. She was holding up a garment she had just shaken out of a bundle.

'Coo, what price that for Wednesday night!' she was saying. 'I wonder if I durst chance it!'

Lottie turned her throbbing head away. What would it matter if Freda did chance it? She would only get the sack if she was found out and take her stumpy figure, two-thirds bust and the other third ankles, somewhere else.

'Me and Alf's going to see Doug and Mary at Notting Hill Gate.' Freda was still in temptation's clutches, while the machine waited for its mawfull. 'Perhaps I better hadn't. It's only the pics. If it had been a dance ——'

Reluctantly she cast the garment into the drum with the others.

A Number! Why couldn't they have let her alone, instead of leading her on and on, a bit at a time so she hadn't noticed it, till she had found herself in that old devil's clutches? She could hear his voice still, not in the shop upstairs where he sat all day among his picture-postcards, but down in that clammy cellar, that seemed to be the cellar of the next house. 'Mind you, my wench,' he had threatened her, 'you open your mouth *that* much' — and his dirty nails had shown her how much —'and *your* shoes'll have somebody else walking in 'em a week or two from now! I'll cut your throat, I will!' And from the wicked look behind his glasses and the way his jaw had chewed in his short grey beard, she had known he meant it. Oh, why hadn't they let her alone?

She passed her slack hand over her dark dank hair as she tried to remember the stages by which it had all come about. It wasn't Miss Tizzard and Miss Constantine really. She was sure they weren't to blame. They had merely called one evening at River Street, Chelsea, and had asked for her mother, and had wanted to know what wages she got and how much rent she paid and so on. That was nothing new in River Street, Chelsea. There was always somebody asking questions. If it wasn't the water it was the gas, or a canvasser, or a district visitor, or the War Cry, or rags or bottles or something. And her mother always trembled at the sight of their notebooks and pencils, as if she might have to go to prison. As if her mother got any wages except what she earned by the day! It was Lottie's wages that kept the home together. But they had come, Miss Tizzard and Miss Constantine, and had said they were Workers Organising Cells, and young women like Lottie were exactly the sort they wanted.

And Lottie had been very much impressed by some of the things they had said. The poor always *did* get the blame for everything. They could *not* do very much unless they got together. If Cells meant that people oughtn't to sleep all those in a room, but ought to have their wages raised and not always be put on, then Cells were a good thing, and Lottie had felt proud when they had told her that she and her friends could all help.

'Carlotta Smith' — it was Freda's voice breaking in on her thoughts — 'you'll be having those clothes in rags in another minute.... So, as I was telling you, when it comes to dancing him and me might have been measured for it ——'

So, if it had stopped at that, all would have been well, but it hadn't stopped at that. It all seemed a nightmare of ages ago, with faces coming and going, and nods and whisperings, and things said, and the next moment somebody saying, No, they didn't mean that. All this had been in Miss Tizzard's and Miss Constantine's flat over the bootshop in the King's Road. Sometimes people had come in like visiting inspectors when they come round to a Board School, holding long discussions among themselves that she was sure Miss Tizzard and Miss Constantine didn't know anything about, because one night Lottie had known they had been talking about her, because she had seen them looking at her. And one of them, a hollow-cheeked man she thought had something to do with the printing, had said that with those looks she was made for it, and the others had looked, too, till her pale face had grown all pink. And it was quite a simple thing they wanted her for, after all. All she had to do (they had told her) was to go to a certain street-corner, and to walk in a certain direction for about a hundred yards ('You know how far a hundred yards is, don't you, Lottie?') where a man whose face and clothes were carefully described would come close to her and touch her hand as she passed. Once she had made sure who he was, she wasn't to look at him, but was to slip a letter into his hand and then to go on to such-and-such an address and say she had done so. They would know if she was telling the truth, because the man would say two words to her, which on no account must she forget.

Freda's voice broke in again. 'And I've tried service, thank you. Here we *can* call our souls our own after five o'clock ——'

Oh, if Lottie could only have said that! But she didn't think her soul would ever be her own again. For, thinking it over, she had come to the conclusion that there must be something not quite right about letters that had to be delivered that way, and she had asked them please not to give her any more. But there had been frowning and whispering over that. Arrangements, it appeared, had been made. Not only would she be helping with the Cells, but there would be five shillings for her, too. And another time the question had arisen who was to be trusted with a certain parcel, herself or somebody called Griggs. The printer this time had been for Griggs. This was a man's job, and Griggs would have to be shifted to another Area before long, anyway. It would be months before they got a line on the girl, and she ought to be kept for one class of job, the printer had said. But the others had been for turning her over to Jacob straightaway.

'So he came into the Clarendon,' Freda chattered, 'and straight he goes into the bar. And when he *did* come out again' — Freda gave a high little laugh — 'well, I will say this for the new one, that a glass of port like the rest of us is good enough for him ——'

And the first thing that happened to you when you got to Jacob's was that your name was taken away from you. Jacob's lot were known by Numbers only. This was so that things could go on just the same, even if somebody dropped out. There was no longer a Carlotta Smith. There was a Sixty-Four instead, and Sixty-Four had been told that if she opened her mouth *that* much, her throat would be cut, and somebody else would be walking in her shoes. Lottie grew faint. She closed her eyes again.

She never knew when he was going to send for her. He even did so in the middle of the day, because now that they gave her money regularly, they seemed to think that it didn't matter about the clock with the red disc, or even if she got the sack. And now, as soon as the hands of the clock reached half-past five, she would have to leave the quiet and safety of this laundry and walk out into a world of night and menaces. At almost any step she took, a stranger might brush past her. 'Sixty-Four, nine-thirty sharp,' the dread words might sound in her ear, and to Lamb's Conduit Street she would have to go. 'A *Num*-ber, a *Num*-ber, a *Num*-ber!' the machines continued to groan.

Already the afternoon was drawing in. Down the vista of machinery, the gas-irons glimmered bluely as they ran over the clothes, and in the office electric lights already burned. No more trucks came from the sorting-girls. With a lump in her throat, Lottie waited from moment to moment for the lights to go up. Suddenly they went up. They showed the pools on the floor, the half-dozen girls at the calenders, old Martha at the hand-washing trough, the hampers on the racks, the garments still endlessly following one another like doomed things into the portals of the drying-closet. They showed Lottie pale, her eyes unnaturally darkened by the electric light, full of dumb fright. Her chief comfort was that Freda was there. She intended to keep close to Freda's side as long as their homeward ways lay together. For she hadn't even Clarry now. It was five nights since she had seen him. Perhaps he had given her the chuck. She didn't much care if he had given her the chuck. She would rather be with Freda now than with anybody else in the world.

Freda had stopped her washers. She was emptying a centrifugal wringer of its contents.

'I don't care if it does want a quarter yet,' she announced. 'I'm going to change before the squash.'

'I'll come with you,' said Lottie.

'There!' Freda broke out. 'If I didn't just *know* you hadn't been listening to a word! Come with me not much you won't! Alf'll be waiting for me outside.'

With which words she stumped off in the direction of the dressing-room, leaving Lottie with dismayed eyes and a mouth gone suddenly slack.

Clarry Moss walked along the Cromwell Road, now stepping out for a few yards, now slackening his pace again. He stepped out whenever he remembered the softness of Lottie's arm; he slacked off again at the thought of the scene to come. At one point he stopped dead, almost as if he would have turned back.

If she *was* getting gay with another bloke ——

As if a fellow hadn't enough to think about as it was ——

But he'd very soon see about *that* ——

Left, right, left, right, his feet continued to move along the Cromwell Road.

He was early at the rendezvous. The double doors at the foot of the alley stood open, but only a single small bustling figure was hurrying through them. He recognised Lottie's friend Freda. She recognised him, too, for opposite the pawnshop window she squared up to him.

'Oh, no, you aren't going to say it's *you!*' she said derisively. 'Fond mem'ry of the past I should have said *you* were! Travelling with the earl on the Continong I suppose? Hope you left his lordship and her ladyship and all the little ships well!'

Clarry didn't often let girls lip him like that, but this time he did not reply.

'Well, do you good to wait a bit. And if the idea is she isn't good enough, she's too good if you ask me. There's others, don't you fret yourself!'

Ho! There were others!

'The cheek to show your face after you haven't been near for five days! I'd like to see one of you keep *me* hanging about waiting like that!' declared Freda, with a toss.

Nor was she kept waiting. At that moment a young man came up and claimed her. Clarry moved away.

Barrows lined the street, offering vegetables, linoleum, cards of buttons, leather for shoe-soles. A fish-stall stirred a faint chord in Clarry's memory, but there was no block of ice to wipe dry, and he turned to the pawnbroker's again. Here a flute awoke a memory much more recent, and, Clarry hardly knew how, a humane inspiration came into his head. Next to the oilshop was a small grocer's, in its window a ham. Clarry entered the shop. A quarter of a pound of the ham, which was already cooked, was cut off for him. Crossing the road, he sought a baker's. Here he bought a couple of rolls. He slit them with his knife and packed the ham inside, wrapping the chunky sandwiches in the halves of the ham-paper and thrusting one into each jacket pocket. He felt hungry as he thought of red pepper and potato-salad.

The girls began to come out in twos and threes, with one or two young male employees among them, on whom Clarry looked with a surly and suspicious eye. He saw Lottie, between two other girls; she passed him blindly, close to him, without seeing him. He followed for a yard or two, and then touched her on the shoulder. She stumbled and almost fell.

Then she faced him, her bosom rising and falling.

'Oh, Clarry!'

He had thrust his hands back into his pockets. He looked at her under knitted brows.

'I should think it was Oh, Clarry!... You come along with me.'

He seized her arm as if he had been about to take her to the police-station, and with the cowed look fading slowly from her face, she fell in by his side.

They 'walked out' because they had nowhere to walk into. Clarry shared his Fulham Road den with two other youths, and the upstairs room that Lottie and her mother occupied could only be reached by passing through a curtained-off portion of somebody else's apartment below. The boots they walked in were their evening slippers and London's street-lighting the fire on their hearth. In silence they skirted the hoarding of the Exhibition, crossed a Crescent, approached a quiet square. She wanted to walk. She would have walked till she dropped. They couldn't do much to a girl when she dropped.

Still in silence they passed down Redcliffe Gardens, crossed the King's Road, reached the Embankment. At last in the little garden where Carlyle's statue is, they sat down on a damp bench under the trees. The sky was broken, and, as if through a rent in that wide roof of theirs, a planet stared down on them. To the left the lights of the suspension-bridge made a necklet of dead pearls, to the right rose the four dim towers of the Power Station, like the cornerstones of some gigantic futurist temple, film-conceived, looming, menacing. While London Sleeps! Well might they put it up in the Tubes to remind people! A Power Station — nothing to be seen, just an electric light or two quietly burning among the sleeping monsters, hardly a purring, hardly a man. All so taken for granted! But if anything should happen to it ——

They couldn't sit side by side the whole evening without speaking. He spoke first, a monosyllable.

'Well?'

Her shoulder was pressed against his. She wanted to make sure by touch that he was there.

'Well, what about it?'

'What about what, Clarry?' she asked faintly.

'Whatever the game is,' he replied.

II

She guessed what he meant before he had said a dozen words. At any other time she would have waved her purity at him like a line of washing in the wind, for the love that walks about is fierce for its equal honour. But his young street-trained mouth was grim. Perversely he was making the worst of it. If there was any game on, somebody's face was going to be pushed back.

And in her mental exhaustion she had forgotten that that was the first thing men thought of. Sometimes she hardly blamed them. One or two of the girls she knew were so cunning about it that she wondered how they could say their prayers the same afterwards. One was even married, married and her boots off, and at her Lottie always looked with fascinated awe. Suppose she was to talk in her sleep? Suppose he was to hear her, and take her by the throat, and ask her, as Clarry was asking, what about it? She sat mute.

'Well?' he said again. 'Going to say you weren't there?'

'Where?' she asked, moistening her lips.

'Well, suppose we say Bedford Row, last Friday night, time, call it eleven-thirty P.M.'

She had lost all count of that horrible day. Four times that evening she had called at Lamb's Conduit Street, only to be told that Jacob couldn't see her yet and she must come again later, and when finally he had seen her, at some time after midnight, he had said that he didn't want her, after all. She might have been in Bedford Row sometime during the evening. She didn't even wonder how Clarry came to know anything about it.

'And after that we'll have a bit of a talk about Lamb's Conduit Street,' he announced.

She trembled anew. There was one way in which she hadn't betrayed him, but there was an even blacker secret she was keeping from him. Why had she let him drag from her the name of that street, the number of that house? Wildly she sought to defend her treason. It was all their fault for giving her a Number. She had only done it to oblige and to help them to make the Cells. She didn't know what was in the letters, sometimes she didn't know the names of the people she passed them to.... But she defended herself in vain. She saw Jacob again, dirty, horrible under his clothes, with the eyes of a wicked, untamed animal, and a voice he had only to raise and she was ready to faint on the spot. She had taken money for it, too. She moaned softly to herself.

'Oh, I didn't tell, I didn't tell!'

'No, you haven't wore your tongue out with telling much.'

'And about that, Clarry, there isn't anybody — may I die on this seat now if there is!'

'Then what are you so all of a heap about?'

'I — I'm not all of a heap ——'

'Look straight at me. You say you ain't meeting another bloke, so help you?'

'So help me, Clarry. They try, but I always walk on. I don't want anybody but you.'

He frowned. But he believed her, and if it wasn't that, it was something else.

'What about that old Shylock in the shop?' he suddenly demanded. 'Because him and me's exchanged a word or two,' he added.

'You haven't!' she wailed, her fingers working.

'Him that looks as if the rats had been at him. Jacob Cossar. Licensed to sell tobacco. I seen him twice. William Nevinson the first time and the Golden Farmer the second. And I want to know what you're doing getting yourself mixed up with a sink of humanity like him!'

She knew that it was only a question of time before he ferreted out everything, perhaps even the Number itself. The sparse leaves shivered on the branches. A gleam from some lamp or other shone damply on Carlyle. A light breeze passed over the river, so that the necklace of the bridge made little pendants in the water, and unseen the four mammoth chimneys towered into the night like the scaffolding of some shadowy Council Chamber still to be. She crept a little closer to him. She lifted up her face.

'Kiss me, Clarry,' she begged.

'Ho! Getting round me, are you?'

'Hold me in your arms a bit.'

And that round, at any rate, he lost, as we all do when they do that and we care enough. He put his arms round her and they kissed. The planet that looked down on their love was not stiller than they for some minutes. Then with a deep sigh she moved. She adjusted her dusty black hat.

'There,' she said, to show him that, much or little, it was her whole heart.

'Now let's get on with what we were talking about,' he resumed.

Before she had answered half a dozen questions, he could have blushed for her. What! A crew of Sunday-morning spouters like them! And him planning to lift her up a bit in life along with himself!

'Miss who?' he demanded.

'Miss Tizzard. And Miss Constantine. Miss Constantine's a B.A. They say they don't believe in only coming to see people when it's an election. They believe in seeing them all the time. That's what the Cells are for. And it *is* the poor that gets the blame, Clarry,' she added with a feeble spark of courage.

'Ho! She was poor, but she was honest,' he said witheringly. 'Go on.'

'And they're friends of Mr. Parratt's, and he's learning to be a Member of Parliament and get the laws altered.'

'*Him* get the laws altered! *I* should say so! What's it all got to do with you?'

'Miss Tizzard says it has to do with everybody except the drones of Society.'

'Drones is bees and Natural History. All the females is barren except the queen. Who'd pay the wages if there wasn't any rich?'

'They say the State would.'

'The State!' Clarry mocked.... 'Well, so the B.A. and the other one passes you on to him that's going to get the laws altered, and he passes you on to old Beezlebub. Is that it?'

'Not all at once,' she faltered. 'There was Mr. Griggs and Mr. McGovern and those.'

'And who might they be?'

'They belong to the Areas.'

'What Areas? Where they leave the milk?'

'They call them Areas. They have them all over the country. Clarry — dear ——'

Her voice pleaded, trembled. One thing was leading with dreadful rapidity to another. She wanted to be kissed again. He was sitting with his hands clasped between his knees, his heels and toes rising and falling alternately. His brow was knitted, and she thought again what a serious, resolute little face it was. Oh, why hadn't he a proper job? Then they could have got married, and have had two rooms, and a door to shut, and she wouldn't have had to look round when she kissed him — it would have been a little bit of heaven after the streets and parks and museums. But he didn't want a regular job, and if he did win a shilling or two on a horse, he lost it again on a double.

Then her heart sank deeper still. What right had she to talk like that, who had taken money she daren't tell him about? Tears that she did not wipe away ran freely down her cheeks.

Then he straightened himself. His hand went to his pocket. It was time for a cigarette. He took out a packet with a card in it, and by the little bull's-eye of his torch read the card. It was one of the Queens of the Screen Series.

'"Miss Mae LeClerquey,"' he read. 'Brought up in a convent. Ho! Showed signs of early talent as a dancer. Ho! Not to mention the monkey on the organ. First big screen-hit in Iceberg Love. Expands from four degrees Centigrade to freezing-point. Height. Hair. Eyes. Ho!'

Then the eye of the torch left the bit of cardboard and rested on the black-and-white of Lottie's skirt.

Women! It would take more than a cigarette-card, it would take a library, and then some, to make any sense of *them!* Miss Mae LeClerquey and her convent, Miss Lottie Smith and her laundry — strike-a-light!

... He did strike a light — for the cigarette. It showed his young set face for a moment before he blew it out. He put the torch away again. The tip of the cigarette seemed to beat, in and out, like a tiny heart.

Areas! So that was it! Of course, there was never a word about Areas in the newspapers. What the newspapers printed was the way things were supposed to be. But at the bottom of a wooden box in his den in Fulham Road, Clarry had a certain small handbook. It was modestly clothed in grey canvas, and it was entitled 'A Police Constable's Guide to his Daily Duties.' There were more solid facts in a book like that than in all the newspapers. From his studies in it Clarry knew precisely in what respects house-breaking differs from burglary. He knew that if he had had to push somebody's face in on Lottie's account, and the fellow had happened to die, he would have had to do so within one year and one day before Clarry could have been convicted of homicide. A most useful book, packed full of information about betting, assault, licensed premises, and the circumstances in which a person under sixteen could be sold tobacco but not cigarettes. It was because this book had shown Clarry his way about, that his questions to Lottie became more and more mere affirmations.

'So it was old Cossar you was hanging about for that night?'

'Yes.'

'What for?'

'I — I don't know. He — he didn't want me, after all.'

'Take letters and messages for him?'

'Yes, Clarry.'

'Get paid?'

She moistened her lips. 'Not at first I didn't.'

'Then you did?'

'Yes.'

'How much?'

'Generally five shillings, and if it was far, they paid my fares.'

'How much have you had altogether?'

'I should think five pounds.'

'Nobody never follow you? Make a grab nor nothing?'

'No.'

(No, not yet, he commented grimly. They hadn't spotted her yet.)

'And you sit there and pretend you don't know what you've gone and done?' he accused her.

Her head fell on her breast. 'I only know that for days I've been wishing I was dead,' she sighed in her exhaustion.

Then he let her have it.

'Do you want to be in common?' he demanded.

'What's that, Clarry?'

'All girls and women to be in common. They start off with that. You'd be in common with old Beezlebub in the shop there, 'cos you can bet the bosses'll look after themselves first. Why, that lot's out to smash up everything, Throne and all!'

She sobbed softly to herself.

'Worse than them upspurrers in history,' he went on. 'Don't you remember that picture I took you to see, Robespeary? Him they threw the green light on his face in the close-up. Because that's what they're after. A Terror. With mobs, and women's heads on pikes, and carmagnolias, and the Houses of Parliament burnt down. Don't you know these people's bought with Russian gold? And here you've been taking it, five bob a time! What do you think of yourself?'

'Ma can't do the work she did, Clarry,' she sobbed.

'Working till you drop's better than being in common, you can tell your ma. What's *he* got to do with Parliament, him you was talking about? If there wasn't one law for the rich and another for the poor, what'ld people want to get on for? Who keeps everything going? Not *that* pro-letter-rate lot! And don't you make any mistake. There's others that can mix it a bit, too, if it comes to trouble. Don't you go thinking I don't know any but the common classes, because you'd be wrong!'

'I'm so frightened, Clarry.'

'Do you good. Now you listen to me. You've got to cut that lot out. Right out. Let 'em find somebody else for their tricoteasies. Are you listening?' For her head had fallen heavily against his shoulder.

'Yes, Clarry.'

'And *I'll* attend to old Mudface. *He* won't get done in in a bath, like that Mayrat, 'cos I don't suppose he's ever had one. A good film that was, Robespeary. You can't mention Felixes and a film like that in the same breath. So I hope you'll let it be a lesson to you.'

And out came the cigarette-packet and Miss Mae LeClerquey again.

Did Carlyle hear them, hovering in spirit about his statue under the damp trees? And if he did, who saw the beginnings, what did he think of the unfolding? If within living memory Morland-like farms and pastures can become an Earls' Court, what of the invisible works of the time? What is a hundred years? The ink is hardly yet dry on the page. Men still only middle-aged have talked with men who in their youth were active Chartists, burnt buildings, drew plugs, massed themselves together armed with picking-sticks. They themselves have seen the thin red line advance at a walk with bayonets levelled upon a hungry and workless horde. Their sons have stoked locomotives and driven lorries as strike-breakers. It has all come about so quickly, so quickly. The débris of the old could not be cleared away before up must go the new. Two snaps of the finger of ironic Time and a Revolution that shook the world has become a celluloid fantasia. Would that Revolution's historian have prophesied? With that grim four-towered neighbour symbolically so close at hand? Would it have humbled him that the wisdom of their fathers, so much more grievous a burden to be borne than their sins, should not even leave those two on the bench untouched? Or would he have remembered his own love and bidden them make the most of it while it was there? Enigma. His spirit had fled. There he stood on his wet plinth, with the planet looking down on him and them alike.

But the heaviness was lifted from Lottie's spirit. She was in Clarry's arms again, and their cheeks and temples moved together as two rolls stuffed with the most appetising ham, became steadily less and less.

III

Late that same night, at twenty minutes past twelve, a deep voice spoke out of a shadow near Bedford Row. It was a policeman's voice.

'Now, then, I've had my eye on you this last hour. What are you up to?'

Clarry judged it best to be conciliatory. 'All right, boss. I'm waiting for a pal.'

'Then go and wait for him somewhere else while you have the chance. There's too many of the likes of you about; nobody to give you a bit of buckle-end during the war, that's what it was. You hop it.'

Reluctantly Clarry moved away.

His heart was still wrung that Mr. Halsey Vibart had driven off with a cold look and a disillusioned word. It was a double smart to be misunderstood by a bloke like that, who had stuffed him with tuck straight from a West-End shop and told him yarns about murderers and policemen cast away in places so unutterably lonely that they couldn't do without one another. In Clarry's pocket was a bit of spruce, and his hand went to it from time to time for comfort. Well, he must try again to-morrow. If he failed then, he must try again on Sunday. Quite apart from the important thing he had to say to him, his eyes wanted to look again on his benefactor and friend.

Half-past nine the next morning found him in Bedford Row again. The outer doors of the office stood open, the Row was at work. He found the door he wanted, and there among the black-and-white name-plates was Mr. Halsey Vibart's card. Clarry climbed to the top floor and rang. Nobody answered; evidently E. J. Owen, Commissioner for Oaths, was away, too. He descended again and stood in thought. Then he had an idea. Quickly he walked to Holborn Tube Station.

The telephone-book hung in the box. Clarry turned over its pages. There it was: 'Vibart Sons & Co., Timber Importers.' He asked for the number, and a voice replied:

'Speaking.'

'Can you tell me ——'

'Speak a little slower, please.'

'Please can you tell me ——'

'Who is it speaking?'

'Name of Moss — as you were — Taylor. Is Mr. Halsey ——'

A pause; then, 'What name did you say?'

'Taylor. Please, I want to know ——'

'Where are you speaking from?'

'A call-office, and I want to know ——'

'Oh, I'm afraid we don't answer calls of that sort,' the voice replied, and a faint 'Ting' told Clarry that he had been cut off. Cursing all aliases and their pitfalls, he left the box.

Then a second brain-wave occurred to him. There was Parkinsons'. Once more he walked along Holborn. He stood for some minutes examining the gaudy self-binder in the window as if he thought of buying it, and then entered the shop and asked for Mr. Halsey Vibart. His question was passed on to somebody else.

'Mr. Vibart been in yet, Mr. Spencer?'

'Not here this week-end. He sent his letters in.'

So that was that. Clarry must wait for another week.

He had walked into Parkinsons' with a certain modest confidence in his outward appearance. In a public bath-house he had splashed and wallowed in hot water until that water had been hot no longer and a voice at the door had demanded to know how much longer he thought his sixpence entitled him to. He wore a white collar, one of six straight from the gentlemen's outfitters, and a tight pair of new brown shoes. In his waistcoat pocket was a comb in a little case, and he took off his cap from time to time, passing his hand over his hair and smelling the palm of it with satisfaction. As he stood at street-corners, deep in thought about Halsey, Lottie, and every now and then on his own account, he scraped his nails as thin as wafers with his penknife.

But on the following Friday there was still no light in Bedford Row. Round and round by Gray's Inn, Clarry walked and back by Theobald's Road, taking in the Row after each brief excursion. He went as far afield as Lamb's Conduit Street, and from across the street saw Jacob Cossar, Licensed to sell Tobacco, reading an evening paper behind his counter. But now Freda Horrocks was seeing Lottie as far as her River Street door every night, and nothing else had happened to Mr. Vibart or his car, or they would have known at Parkinsons', where Clarry had called a second time.

The third time he called he saw a different person. This person wanted to know Clarry's name, all about him, and his business with Mr. Vibart. Then he refused to give Clarry any further information.

So passed three weeks, and on the fourth week-end Clarry himself was otherwise occupied.

There was no mystery about Halsey's non-appearance. He had merely been running up to town in the middle of the week instead of at the end of it, for, with April in, the country was a pleasanter place to spend Sunday in than London. On the Friday evening when he next found himself in town, he had bought an evening paper and was reading it in a basement lounge not far from Piccadilly Circus that was used solely by men. A bar-counter occupied one end of the lounge, and its ceiling was of mirrors that inverted everything beneath. Three or four men stood quietly talking at the bar, one of them a huge-shouldered fellow in a double-breasted blue overcoat with a velvet collar. He had a couple of week-end bags at his feet. Hal, brown and with his lungs full of fresh air, had come to London for a change. This man was evidently leaving it for a change.

Hal tossed the paper aside. There was absolutely nothing in it, only racing, football results, cinemas, bargain-sales and the Woman's Page. He wondered why people should be treated so like kids. It wasn't as if they wanted to know the whisperings of the Chancelleries, or the secret foregatherings of millionaires, or what Parliament was really doing while it was beating the drum about something else. Halsey himself didn't even want to pry into those occasional brief and really interesting paragraphs that appear in one paper on one day only and are afterwards looked for there or anywhere else in vain. Still, a fellow did want something more for his penny than news of a horse he hadn't backed or Penelope and her recipe for currying eggs. Historic events had taken place in the past, prophetic things might be preparing for the future, but the contemporary record was fit only for an infants' school.

London, the biggest city in the world, and nothing whatever happening remarkable enough to get into print!

Then he heard his name spoken.

'Hallo, Vibart, how's the world using you?'

The speaker was no more an oil-painting than he had been in the old Eton days, and it was to the Eton days that the sound of his voice took Hal instantly back. The queer little old Goblin and his pigeons! He had always been an oddity. He hadn't kept the pigeons in the place set apart for the Etonians' pets, but in his room, to the horror of his dame. He said it saved stamps to send his weekly letters home in that way, and the pigeons came and went, only the Goblin knew where, hovering about the cote he had fixed to the outside wall. The Goblin, Gobbles, otherwise Cyril Valentine Bigsworth-James: Hal could see him in the old name-carved schoolroom still, his oversized head sunk between shoulders humped almost to deformity, his large ears, the stare of his March-Hare eyes. But, not many years afterwards, for all his eccentricities, if ever a man had counted the teeth in the grin of death, B.-J. had. Eight times during the war, some said oftener, he had been taken up in a night-flying plane and dropped behind the German lines, with no uniform to protect him and his doom certain if he as much as smelt of a pigeon. Hal remembered, too, his freak memory: three, four, five hundred things, three, four, five hundred numbers. You showed the Goblin the list. He shut his eyes, developed his mental photograph, fixed it, and you might challenge him six months afterwards. It was more than a year since Hal had seen him. He challenged him now.

'"Horseradish," Gobbles,' he said.

Already the hare's eyes had taken a wide stare round the lounge. Then they were turned on Hal's, brown and round like a hare's.

'Eh? Oh, that! That's gone long ago. Done too many since then. Besides, you don't know yourself. What are you doing here?'

And Halsey, yawning, told Bigsworth-James that he was only waiting for something to happen.

'Like that, is it?' the Goblin observed when the drinks were brought. He was sunk in the leather chair, one small foot on his knee, gazing up at the ceiling. He made a little upward pass with his glass in it, as if he drank his own very good health. 'Always amuses me, that ceiling,' he said. 'All the flowers just going to fall out of the bowls and the drinks out of the glasses, and never doing it. Waiting for something to happen, like you. Do you know any of those fellows over there?'

'No.'

'Tough-looking customer in the blue overcoat; regular Milo the Crotonian, looks as if he drank his bathwater and ate his young. Have you seen Audrey lately?'

'Not for three or four months.'

'And how's your Uncle Percy getting on? I always liked old Percy... Ah!'

And with a sudden 'Excuse me a minute' he was on his feet without waiting for an answer.

The man who had appeared at the foot of the stairs might have been the twin brother of the man with the week-end bags. He wore the same overcoat, had the same hard eye and solid clean-shaven jaw. Halsey's fellow Etonian seemed a dwarf beside him as he moved across the room. For some moments the two men talked in the doorway; then the eyes of both were turned towards the man with the week-end bags. The Goblin crossed to the counter. He touched Milo the First on the sleeve. Then Milo picked up the bags, and the three stood conversing in low tones at the foot of the stairs. Hal caught the words, 'Fetch him in.' Milo the Second went out. It was at his companion when he returned that Hal sat staring.

That youngster again! His cap was in his hand, his hair had been cut, and he wore a clean collar, but he was the same brat Hal had had up in his rooms that night his steering had gone wrong. B.-J. appeared to be giving him instructions. The colloquy ended. Milo the First picked up the bags, and the lad followed the two of them out. But as quickly as a cat moves, he took a light step back. His eyes were on Hal's for a moment, bright with recognition. He nodded, and made a little movement with his finger at his lips. Then he really was gone. The Goblin took his seat by Hal's side again.

Hal didn't resume the conversation where it had broken off. He rather wanted to hear what the Goblin had to say for himself. But B.-J. was looking up at the ceiling again, where the flowers didn't fall out of the bowls nor the drinks out of the glasses. His expression was the one he wore when he was memorising something.

At last Hal spoke.

'Who were those fellows?'

'Who? Those fellows I spoke to? Oh, two chaps off to Birmingham,' the Goblin replied, not moving.

'And the youngster?'

'Some lad they picked up to carry the bags, I expect.'

'Gobbles ——' said Hal.

'Well?'

'You damned liar ——'

B.-J.'s eyes were suddenly on Hal's. 'What do you mean?'

'That lad never touched those bags. I doubt if he could have lifted one of them. I heard 'em put down, and they weighed a ton apiece.'

'Very observant of you,' said the Goblin, with composure.

'And what were you signalling to that fellow at the bar with your glass in the ceiling?'

The Goblin ceased to nurse his foot. He leaned forward and spoke abruptly.

'Look here, has Audrey been talking to you?' he demanded.

'No, I haven't seen Audrey.'

'Then what the devil do you mean?'

'Well, I happen to know that youngster, for one thing. He's a motor-mechanic, and his name's Taylor. He did a small job for me.'

'What sort of a job?' the Goblin asked.

'I broke a steering-pin and he put me a new one in.'

'How did you come to break a steering-pin?'

'I don't know. Worn out, I expect.'

'When was this?'

'A month or five weeks ago.' He gave his old schoolfellow a brief account of the accident.

'And what do you say the youngster's name is?'

'Taylor — at least, that's the name he told me.'

The Goblin turned to the contemplation of the ceiling again. 'Well, life's full of quiet humour,' he remarked. '"Horseradish," by the way, is 201 of a list made on the second of February last year, in the lower bar at Princes. You and Hopkinson and Courtney and Trench were there, and Trench had a cold and was taking eucalyptus. Did Taylor tell you anything else about himself?'

'I seem to remember it was rather my evening out. I mean I did most of the talking.'

'Doing anything particular this evening?'

'No. I rather thought I'd like to do a show.'

'Then what about one of those Italian places first, where you get *minestrone* and a bird made of half a sausage and two frogs'-legs?'

'Anywhere you like.'

And, after all, you cannot, in London, the largest city in the world, bring several millions of people together, people all different, some wanting this of life, some that, all with their different ideas of how to get it, and the echoes of a war hardly yet out of their ears — you cannot have all this and really nothing whatever happening.

But Hal didn't think much of the Italian place in the Soho side-street to which B.-J. took him. It was hot, noisy, smelly, and crowded, and for nearly half the meal B.-J. was absent, having disappeared somewhere with the proprietor. Returning and hastily bolting down his meal, he suggested the Palace, only a few hundred yards away; and that, at least, after the cinemas of small market-towns, Hal found exhilarating. A perfect orchard of girls filled the stage, and the music had a crash and a pulse in it. Once the Goblin, looking at his watch, muttered something about telephoning, and went out. Hal continued to watch the tossing, smiling orchard on the stage.

It was quite casually, a little before the end of the performance, that Cyril Valentine Bigsworth-James again mentioned the youngster who certainly had not carried those bags.

'Not that it matters in the least,' he said, 'but his name's Moss, not Taylor. Clarence Moss. He'll be just about leaving Birmingham now, and with any luck he ought to be worth quite a lot of money to somebody, just as he stands.'

IV

Halsey was never much surprised at anything that the Goblin did. He was, however, somewhat taken aback to learn that his Cousin Audrey might be expected at the place to which he had been brought.

'The porter says she's upstairs somewhere,' B.-J. said. 'I may have to stay a bit, so I shall leave my things here. You please yourself.' And he hung up his hat and coat in a small lobby under a flight of steep red-carpeted stairs, at the top of which burned a crimson-shaded standard lamp.

Obviously at that hour of the night the premises were closed to the general public. A featureless door in a side-street led to the back part of a large ground-floor restaurant, and through a locked iron lattice Halsey could see the restaurant chairs piled on the tables for the night, that the floor might be swept in the morning. In a small lighted office a man was counting money, and on a ledge lay the visitors' book. The red carpet of the stairs had a threadbare and public look, and had evidently been pulled up some eight inches to make new edges. If this was the best B.-J. could provide in the way of a club, Hal decided to keep his coat on.

Upstairs was even more disappointing. The baize door on the landing opened on a large and lofty room that had once been ornate, but was now a place of blackened gilding, closely-drawn and smoke-saturated maroon curtains, and a ceiling grimy with a quarter of a century's burnt-offerings of food and tobacco. On a platform at the farther end of the room, the piano was closed and a 'cello had been put to bed in its wooden box. Some thirty or forty people sat at small tables with drinks in front of them, mostly beer and whiskey, and here and there a few sandwiches on a plate gave the establishment the status of a supper-club. For the rest, it was simply a retreat where people who knew how to get in could drink after licensed hours.

'I'll see if I can find her. You order what you want,' said the Goblin, and made off, leaving Hal sitting at a small table with artificial flowers in a cheap glass and three bentwood chairs drawn up to it.

Well, Hal thought, Audrey was old enough to please herself. Then he began to look about him with more particularity. A few of the women showed bare backs, but except for those worn by a couple of blue-chinned Italian waiters there was not a dinner-jacket in the room. Men sat in their overcoats, as Halsey himself did, with their hats on the tables or at their feet on the floor, and a little way on Hal's right was a man in a complete suit of leather, belted coat, motor-cycling overalls complete. Hal picked up a leaflet from the table. From it he learned that he was in Raffaeles', and on a forthcoming date Raffaeles' announced a Grand Gala Night for their patrons and clients. A Grand Gala Night! Here! Hal thought of alcoves with discreet and fruit-like lamps, of new places where artists had splashed morbid and symbolic female shapes on walls, of newer places still with illuminated drums and extravagant mascot-dolls and perhaps a sub-lighted glass floor to dance on. That would have been much more like Audrey. But here was only a bankrupt Victorian public room brought down to the uses of a public bar with drinks at twice or thrice the price. And suddenly a rough grating voice was raised not far from where Hal sat. It was the voice of a scowling man of thirty in a heavy brown overcoat, and he had brought his fist down on the table, causing the glasses to jump and heads to turn.

'You're afraid, some of you, that's what you are!' this man cried.

'Shut up!' said one of his companions in a low voice.

'You're just afraid! I'm not going to be had for a mug!'

'Nobody's having you for a mug ——'

'I tell you there's too much of this —— kid-glove business! He's here, isn't he? What more do you want? Why doesn't somebody do something?'

But the incident died down in mutterings and whisperings as suddenly as it had arisen.

As Hal looked round him more particularly still, he somehow became aware that a woman a few yards away on his left had hardly taken her eyes off him since he had entered the room. She was dressed with some pretension to finery, in a wrap of white fur that had slipped down over one powdered shoulder, and she might have been a prostitute except that she quite obviously wasn't one. Neither had the two men with whom she sat much the air of men-about-town. The more this woman looked at Hal, the more they looked the other way, and even when her eyes met Hal's fully, she did not immediately lower them. Hal didn't really suppose he was being watched for any physical attraction he possessed. The woman lighted a cigarette before looking indifferently away again. And still there was no sign either of Audrey or B.-J.

Then he began to run over the evening since B.-J. had accosted him in the lounge with the mirrored ceiling. One trifling indication seemed to add itself to another. Undoubtedly B.-J. had been signalling in the ceiling to the man with those two remarkably heavy bags. Then had come the other man, then the lad, and the three of them had gone off together, apparently to Birmingham. At that suffocating Italian restaurant the Goblin had spent half his time apart with the proprietor instead of eating his dinner. He had telephoned from the theatre, and had then announced that Audrey would probably be here. Well, if there was a chance of burning her fingers, it wasn't so unlike her, after all. She was not a Vibart, but a Fullalove, and Hal remembered his Uncle Victor and the theatricals in the double drawing-room at home. It was from Uncle Victor she had got it. An imaginary head on a property charger or a lion's mouth to put her own head into, and there was no holding Audrey. He was fond enough of her, of course, but ——

Suddenly all thoughts of Audrey vanished from his mind. He was looking at the girl who had just entered the room.

Everything, every circumstance, every probability, was against it. A hundred times less even than Audrey did she fit in there. In that smoky place, with those stale odours about her, her face seemed to swim up out of some deep innocence of time, breaking surface into his life. It floated over a twilight-blue velvet wrap like a lotus-flower on an evening pool. She could hardly have been more than three-and-twenty. Her eyes, at that distance apparently of palest blue, had the brooding setting that phrenologists say means music or languages. As with one movement she threw both head and cloak back, the tips of her fingers put away a half-cropped valance of brown hair, showing a broad bare brow. The full lids fell as if they had been weighted inside like those of a doll. She was followed by a big corpulent man with a square-cut beard and a cloak over his crumpled evening shirt. He removed a wide hat and showed a high bald dome and a pair of yellowish-tinted glasses set in rims like the rings of onion that are served with *hors-d'œuvres*. As she was about to sit down at a table just inside the door, he said something to her. She seemed about to protest that she was tired. The light glinted on the yellowish glasses. He made an abrupt, un-English gesture with his thumb. She passed down the room, behind the piano, and was gone.

'Well, Hal, isn't it time you were in bed?'

It was Audrey, at last. It had pleased her to dress *en Espagnole* that evening. A black varnished hat was tilted over her thick, handsome brows, and a gaudy mantilla was drawn about her shapely shoulders. Her sombre yet sparkling presence seemed to make a tame rabbit of the woman in the white fur. But her restless hands betrayed her. She was fidgety. If she had just left B.-J., she didn't say so. Instead, though she had just said he ought to be in bed, she asked him what time it was.

'Just gone one.'

'Not really! Are you sure your watch is right? Oh, dear! — Well, how are you, Hal?'

'All right,' he answered briefly.

'You haven't got a drink or anything. That's the waiter, Lucca, the stout one. Call him.'

'Do you want anything yourself?'

'No.'

'Then I don't. What's become of B.-J.?'

'I don't suppose he'll be long now. Do have a drink.'

The woman who was not a prostitute was now watching Audrey as she had watched Halsey. Audrey's fingers were striking little dumb chords on the table. Brightly she asked after Percy, brightly she asked what Hal was doing. But the next moment she again wanted to know what the time was and whether he was sure his watch was right. Suddenly Hal asked her a point-blank question.

'Are you a member of this place?'

'Well — I come sometimes.'

'Who are these people?'

She made an effort to speak lightly. 'Which? There are rather a lot of them.'

'Well, that woman who keeps staring at you. She stared at me, too.'

'I believe she's a Mrs. Griggs. That's her husband with the pipe. The other man's called Parratt, and he's a prospective Socialist candidate for somewhere or other. I don't know any of them to speak to.'

'What's that fellow doing in the cycling-kit?'

'Where?' The varnished hat gleamed as it turned. 'Oh, his name's Giles.'

'Who's the man with the overcoat, who said there'd been enough of the damned kid-glove business?'

Again the fingers worked. 'Did somebody say that?'

'And the man with the horn glasses by the door?'

But her sudden 'Ah!' had nothing to do with the man behind the door. At the other end of the room the Goblin had appeared. Slowly, with a nod here and a word there, he was making his way towards them. Audrey's eyes under the thick brows were one supplicating question as he drew near. But B.-J. only gave an infinitesimal shake of his head, and Audrey began to bite her lips.

'But it's getting on for half-past one!'

'Look out! You're being watched every moment of the time.' But only a lip-reader could have caught the Goblin's words.

'Oh!' She tried to suppress a shiver. 'You don't suppose any one can have got at the Bugatti!'

'Giles hasn't had her out of his sight all day.'

'What's it like outside?'

'Clearing and a moon.'

'How I wish you'd let Giles start up!'

'Take it easy, dear. I'm watching the door. Lucca'll let me know the moment anything happens. Or would you like to go home now?'

Her reproachful 'Oh, how *could* I!' seemed to come from the very bottom of her chest.

Whatever it was, it didn't last very much longer. From across the room Lucca the waiter was trying to catch the Goblin's eye. With Mrs. Griggs's eyes burning holes in his rounded back, B.-J. strolled away.

By this time Hal had decided that it would be more profitable to watch than to ask questions. To-morrow would be time enough for the questions. But to-morrow he would want to know what this was about tampering with a Bugatti. He would want to know why a motorcyclist was standing by waiting for orders to start up. He would want to know who was expected and overdue, what the kid-glove business was, what Audrey had to do with it all, and, for his own information, where the girl in the blue wrap came in. Then, quite suddenly, his cousin was no longer at his side. Clutching the mantilla about her, she was hurrying across the room.

But in less than a minute she was coming back again. Her lips were at Halsey's ear.

'It's you he wants. Hurry. And if you don't come back, you *must* see me at the studio on Sunday afternoon. Be quick ——'

She pushed him away.

The Goblin was standing outside on the landing. At the end of a short passage the stairs doubled and rose to the floor above. Without a word B.-J. led the way to the lower bedroom floor of the hotel and along a corridor. The door at which he pushed must have been a sound-proof door, for with its opening there immediately broke out the chattering of typewriters. A little way farther on, the passage turned to the right, and there was a closed door at its blind end. On another door at right-angles to it, in letters that had once been white, Hal read the words 'BATHROOM.' There was a vague smell of ether.

'In here,' said the Goblin, and he pushed at the bathroom door.

It was a square, old-fashioned bathroom, papered with varnished yellow blocks big enough to have built a pyramid. The bath itself was a built-in structure of mahogany, with a mahogany lid that shut down and made a table of it. It was a table now. At it stood two men. The face of one of them looked out of the fur oval of a helmet. The other was pointing to a tin basin on the floor, with red cloths floating in red water. 'You might empty that,' he was saying, and as the other stooped to pick up the basin, Hal saw, lying in his trousers and half a grey shirt, with his folded jacket for a pillow, his head newly bandaged, and one arm strapped closely to his side, his young friend who had told him that beer-finings were made of isinglass, which came from the air-bladder of the sturgeon.

'Damn that ether, it smells a mile!' the Goblin was muttering. 'How does he seem now?'

'Shaken. It was a hell of a long way to have to bring him in that state. Anybody know where he lives?'

'That's no good. It's in a slum. And they'd ask questions at a hospital.'

'Can't he stay here?'

'I'd a thousand times rather he didn't, and you know how *I'm* fixed. Every time I go in and out, down it goes in somebody's notebook.'

The bandaged head on the jacket moved. The words came brokenly. Blood had dried about Clarry's mouth.

'Ha' he come?'

'What's that, sonny?'

'My guv'nor ——'

Hal stepped forward. He bent over the lad.

'Yes, I'm here,' he said.

'Augh — augh ——'

Hal turned to B.-J. 'Do you say he asked for me?'

'His first words. Of course, he saw you with me in that lounge place.'

'What's happened?'

The doctor answered this question.

'Manhandled, and a dislocated shoulder. He might be sick presently. A certain amount of shock, too, and possibly more to come.'

'And do you mean that he's nowhere to go?'

Nobody spoke.

It was between Friday midnight and Saturday's dawn. At the Power Station the lights burned quietly among the drowsing dynamos, and the Tube trains, that remind us of what goes on While London Sleeps, had not yet begun to run. The newspaper-trains rushed across the land carrying their heavy freights of nothing. 'Get a taxi,' said Hal.

But it was not necessary to get a taxi. Forty yards down the side-street stood the Bugatti. They descended by another way than that of the shabby red-carpeted stairs, and between them Halsey, B.-J., the doctor, and the man in the fur-lined helmet lifted Clarry Moss into the car.

CHAPTER III

I

IT WAS too late now to ask himself whether he had acted wisely. Probably he hadn't, but there had seemed little else to do. The lad would have to have Halsey's bed and Hal the sofa. Straight into the bedroom Hal and the man in the fur-lined casque carried him. They took off his boots, socks, and trousers. He moved only once, and that was when they were removing the jacket that had been buttoned loose round his neck. His fingers closed on it, and they allowed him to keep it. He was asleep before they had left the room.

'I've only beer, I'm afraid,' said Hal, switching on the light and busying himself in the cupboard. 'Are you going back to Birmingham to-night?'

Before replying, the driver of the Bugatti crossed to the window and drew aside the corner of a curtain. He raised the sash softly and looked out. He appeared satisfied, and let the curtain fall again, but left the sash raised. Then he fixed a pair of singularly light-coloured eyes on Hal.

'You said?'

'I said were you going back to Birmingham straightaway.'

The light eyes were heavy with sleep. The froth of the beer was on the man's ragged hayband moustache.

'See here,' he said. 'I don't know you. I don't belong to this end. I don't belong to an end at all. I belong to the bloody middle. The road's where I belong, and that's all I know about anything. Twenty hours' sleep this week's what I've had, and it's three now, and I'm supposed to be at the bench at half-past seven.'

'Do you work in Birmingham?'

'See here.' The pale eyes were wary and hostile. 'Whoever you are, you might know a bit better than that. I don't know what you mean about Birmingham. I stick to my job. Just you forget about Birmingham. There ain't such a place. I'm going where I'm going, and if you've got another half glass of that beer, I'll be getting along. Cars have been left standing just a few minutes too long before this.'

Five minutes later, the Bugatti had vanished away into the night again. Hal went into his bedroom to take a last look at his visitor. There was nothing more he could do for him. From a cupboard he took a rug, a couple of jackets, and his dressing-gown. Then, with these for coverings and Audrey's bright cushions for his pillow, he went to bed himself.

To go to bed very late is not necessarily to sleep late, too. Hal woke early, quite fresh, but it was with yesterday's freshness still on him. Then he realised what it was that had woke him. His bell had been ringing for some little time. He cursed the bell. He hated showing as much as the tip of his nose before he was shaved and dressed. He shook off his rug-and-jacket coverings and went to the door. The doctor of the night before stood on the landing.

None too graciously Hal asked him whether he would like to see the patient at once, and the doctor said he would. Hal showed him the bedroom door, and then, with his dressing-gown about him, sat down on the edge of his own couch to wait.

At the end of twenty minutes the doctor called: 'May I come in?'

Hal nodded to a chair, but the doctor put up a refusing hand.

'No, no, my day's work's to begin. A doctor's time is never his own.' Then his eyes blinked behind his gold spectacles. 'Well. Things might have been a good deal worse. He's young and tough, and there aren't likely to be any complications. I'll send a man round at once to make his mouth more comfortable, and then a little milk, an egg, fish when he feels like it ——' His voice tailed rather vaguely away.

Hal asked how long his guest was likely to remain, and the doctor became vaguer still.

'You mean — er — as far as I'm concerned? A few days, a few days. I'm speaking for myself, of course.'

'Well? You're his doctor?'

'Quite, quite. A simple everyday case. Er — with regard to last night. Early this morning I should say. My own position is a somewhat peculiar one. I don't know how well you know Bigsworth-James, for example ——'

'Quite well. We were at Eton together,' Hal put in.

'In that case — however. A very remarkable character. Very few people would think to look at him — but we needn't go into that. Not to beat about the bush, you heard what he said.'

Hal wanted to shave and bathe and dress.

'Not to beat about the bush, I did,' he said bluntly. 'He said he couldn't get in and out of his own place without somebody putting it down in a notebook.'

'*Ex*-actly!' said the doctor, as if that explained everything. 'And one has every sympathy with — with certain aims and ideals. One even helps in one's small way. At the same time, I personally am obliged to dissociate myself. In short, I happen to be a member of the Church of Rome.'

'What's that got ——' Hal began, and suddenly checked himself. Where had he heard that a member of that Church is debarred from membership of any Secret Society?

'Of course, professionally I am only too happy to be of the slightest use ——' the doctor was murmuring.

'I see,' said Hal slowly. At two o'clock in the morning this man's knowledge and skill were at his friends' disposal. They could command him again before breakfast the next day. But he wouldn't call himself by their name.

'So if you have a sheet of paper ——' the doctor said.

At Halsey's writing-table he jotted down a couple of prescriptions. He pressed his own thermometer upon Hal. Then, murmuring to himself, 'Ideals — sympathy — one's friends — but unfortunately ——' he shook Halsey warmly by the hand and was off.

Hal's shaving-things were in his bedroom, and on the pillow where his own head should have rested was a white steak-pudding neatly pinned up in a napkin. This was Clarry's head, and he turned it as Hal entered. His breathing was short and painful as he strove to spare his injured ribs, and the grimace that twitched his bruised and swollen face was the best he could do in the way of a smile. But under the napkin his eyes were bright, and on the counterpane within reach of his free hand was Hal's shaving-glass. Halsey stood by the bedside looking down on him.

'Well?' he said, without a smile. 'How is it this morning?'

Broken sounds came from the swollen mouth.

'Been admiring yourself, I see. Well, you're a picture.'

Clarry looked at his face in the glass again, and more sounds came. 'Hurgical Knot,' Halsey made out, or something like it. 'Hafety Pins. Hurgical Knot.'

'Come, you're not to talk. There'll be a dentist here presently. Do you think you could sit up while I made your bed?'

It took Clarry a full minute to wriggle himself painfully to the bed's edge. Then with slow care he dropped his feet to the bedside mat and gazed down at his toes, flexing and extending them, which motions he was able to perform in a quite remarkable degree. He seemed pleased with the exercise, and wishful that it should be noticed. Hal made the bed behind him, and then crossed to a drawer. What was left of the grey shirt still clothed Clarry's upper portion, and with that strapped-up arm a pyjama-jacket wouldn't be much use to him, but he might be more comfortable in the trousers. Hal brought them round and knelt at Clarry's feet, holding the pyjama legs open for him.

'Put your foot in there — now the other ——'

He tied the cord round Clarry's waist. On his slight limbs the pyjama-legs resembled a pair of sail-covers. Then Hal put him back into bed again. He fetched one of Audrey's cushions to pack under his pillow, and then thought it time to look after himself. From under the bed he dragged the tin bath. He gathered up from the dressing-table the objects he required. Then, telling Clarry to have his sleep out, he trundled the bath into the adjoining room.

He had shaved. He had moved the gate-legged table from the middle of the room and had put the bath in its place. He had filled the bath and had stripped to the buff. The silk shade over the porcelain cone looked like a shower over his head, and his sponge was heavy with water. 'Pla-a-a-a-ash!' the water ran from his shoulders into the tub.

And 'Rrr-r-r-r-rrp!' went his electric bell again.

It was the dentist, with the tools of his trade in a small handbag.

Hal showed him the patient's room.

Hal had dried himself. He had put his shirt on. He had one leg in his trousers when the dentist put his head round the door.

'Got any hot water?' he asked. 'And if you've an old towel that doesn't matter ——'

'Towels in the bottom drawer on the left, and the kettle will be boiling in five minutes,' said Hal, and continued to dress.

He was still not tired, still fresh with that held-over freshness of yesterday. His hands prepared breakfast automatically and intelligently. It was well that he did so, for his mind was elsewhere. The crust of the earth seemed to have worn suddenly thin overnight. Rumblings and reverberations were taking place underneath. Yet what had happened in those few hours since he had tossed an evening paper aside because there was nothing in it? Only that the Goblin had jumped up as if out of a star-trap, and this lad in the next room after him. Only that he had gone on to a dingy night-club, and somebody had been overdue, and when finally he had appeared, it had turned out to be the same lad again. And as nobody else had seemed to want him, Hal had brought him on here, and here he would have to stay for a few days, and then Hal supposed he would go away again, and that was one way of looking at it.... But the other way? That was where the reverberations and rumblings began. That was where things got poised and overcharged, and trifles weren't trifles any longer, as he had heard old trappers speak of high still places where to speak above a whisper is to bring an avalanche thundering down. That night-club hotel? Did guests commonly use typewriters in their bedrooms at two o'clock in the morning? And, now that he came to think of it more closely, what *had* there been wrong with that drinking-room that was soon to be the scene of a Grand Gala Night? The place had reeked of antagonism, yet of a tacit understanding, too. It reminded him of a few years back, when the trenches had sometimes approached so closely that the result had been a sort of truce, with neither side lifting a hand lest a retaliatory hell should be drawn upon themselves. The 'kid-glove business'? That motor-cyclist standing by? Audrey's agitation? B.-J., whose comings and goings were written down in notebooks? The girl with the beautiful back-tilted mask and the dropped eyelids, who had gone away at the flicking of a man's thumb? These were the questions that he had shelved until to-morrow, and now to-morrow was here.

And now he had brought it all home with him to his quiet rooms at the top of a block of lock-up offices. It had come in with a driver whose week's allowance of sleep was twenty hours, who had told Hal that he ought to have more sense than to talk about Birmingham. Hal had hardly shut his eyes and opened them again before in had walked the Roman Catholic doctor, and now a strange dentist was plying his trade in Hal's bedroom. Very well. Audrey had said that she must see him at the studio on Sunday. He would certainly be there. In the mean time his eyes fell on the prescriptions on the writing-table. He finished his tea and bread-and-butter and reached for his hat. Half opening the bedroom door, he asked the dentist how long he was likely to be, and was told another half-hour or more. Out Halsey went, in search of medicines, eggs, tobacco, and his day's letters from the office.

Clarry had been given half a grain of morphia; but what is sleep? Dark waters ran round and round in Clarry's head, with lights that gleamed fantastically on them from time to time. The lights were the sparse lights of villages, rushing towards him through the night and dropping away again behind. Sometimes there mingled with them the orange blur of an overtaken train, sometimes the electric lighting of a town. And lumme! Whatever could there be in them two bags at Clarry's feet as he sat behind the two men in the back of the car? Forgings? It was a wonder they didn't drop through the car floor, they weighed so!

Then they were telling him again exactly what it was he had to do. 'And mind you do it, you young bastard,' one of the blue-overcoated giants had added, good-naturedly enough, but *they* weren't the kind of blokes to stand any nonsense! Something between gents and bookies they were, and powerful! Strike-a-light, it was something to think about, the strength of them two chaps!

And they were telling him the risks, fair and square. A spout might give way or a gutter break under his hand. If an alarm was sounded, he'd have to look after himself. But the moment he was given the packet, they'd be behind him to cover him, and he was to hook it as if the devil was after him, and pass the packet on to the fellow who would be in the blue Bugatti with the engine running. If Clarry could scramble in, too, well and good, but the packet came first.

Flick, flash, the lights of the vehicles they passed; rush, the torrent of air full on Clarry's face... and then the scene shifted again. He was in the upper storey of that warehouse, and the lights and the noises were blended now into one low hoarse roar, the roar of the fierce flame that dissolved the tempered metal into smoke. Then the silence, broken only by the grunting and panting of those two giants as they put their united weight on the instrument with the jaws, that had torn the steel apart as if it had been a sardine-tin. Through the morphia-fumes he heard again that fierce 'Come open, you ——!'

And coming and going through it all he was in a different place altogether. He was going down the steps of an underground bar to get his instructions, and lo-and-behold, when he got down, there, under a ceiling of looking-glass, his guv'nor was sitting, the guv'nor he had been looking for for weeks, having a drink and waiting there for him, like as if there was a purpose in it all....

He didn't know what it was that had hit him on the head. A rubber pipe with a cork in it, perhaps, that packs close and lays a man out without breaking anything. He was in the street again, flattened against a wall, waiting for the signal to run. 'Now, like hell!' the hoarse voice sounded in his ear... and down he had gone.

The steak-pudding tossed on the pillow as he watched the broken panorama fly past. He was struggling to his feet again, while somewhere was a smashing of glass and a free fight went on behind him ——

Then the worst of all, when he had suddenly missed the packet ——

But it was all right. The chap in the Bugatti had it, and was dragging Clarry into the moving car ——

Christmas, what a night!

And now he supposed he would have to give Lottie something. A fur coat, he thought. The lights of cars and villages became the lights of a fair on a piece of waste ground near Walham Green. Lottie, in a fur coat, was trying to mount that moving roundabout in his head, scrambling on to the merry-go-round of horses. She was on the horse next to him, with the black-and-white skirt showing under the fur coat, and he was ticking her off proper. What he did and what she did were different things, he was telling her; his pals were classy, not that pro-letter-rate lot with their toes sticking out of their boots. He was stopping with one of his pals now, a pal who lent him his own pyjamas, and got a doctor in to look after him; Clarry didn't go to no panel for *his* doctoring! And he had important business with this pal the moment they got half an hour to themselves. What business? That had nothing to do with her. 'You and Freda go to the pics and leave old Nebuchadnezzar to me!' the thickened lips muttered....

Then came the deeper levels. The merry-go-round dissolved in smoke as the metal had done under the oxyacetylene flame. Lottie and the circus-horse were no longer there. Halsey, coming in presently to see if he wanted anything, found him as still as a log except for his breathing, which was short and from the stomach, as he sought to spare his aching shoulder and the upper part of his lungs.

II

When the fog falls on Hyde Park Corner, and the traffic slows down to a stop, and the babel of the talking horns is heard, then out come the creosote torches. Not the wan arcs overhead, but the linkboy's sputter of murky orange is our guide. It was very like that in the time of these events. What did men do in the war when they wanted to hide a thing? They hid it if they could, but if they couldn't, they made a hundred others so like it that not even an aeroplane's eye could tell the difference. What do they do in the peace? They still hide it if they can, but if they can't, they mobilise it, millionise it, cinema it, broadcast it, affirm it, deny it, make a public stir about it, and then let men grope for it. Halsey was groping. He might have been groping still but for Clarry Moss. And he might have been happier so.

It was nearly nine o'clock that evening when their conversation began, but it might have been any hour, so did the tide of life ebb away from Bedford Row at one o'clock of a Saturday afternoon. The fire that Halsey had lighted in the bedroom had settled to a still glow. The night also was still, and apparently they were doing something at the Power Station, for once in a while the reading-light over Clarry's head gave a momentary flicker and then burned blandly on again. At these moments every other electric light on that quarter of London gave a flicker, too.

Halsey had gone to get Clarry's bread-and-milk, and Clarry had thought there might be just time to slip out of bed and get that steering-pin, which was in one of his trousers pockets. He had one foot out of bed. The other was following it when there came Halsey's push at the door, and both feet were hastily drawn back again.

'Here, what are you doing?' Halsey asked.

'Nothing.'

'Weren't you getting out of bed?'

'No, guv'nor.'

'Well, here's your supper. I say, you're looking a bit better.'

Clarry had possessed himself of the shaving-glass again. Again he looked with disapproval at his bandages.

'Hurgical Knot,' he mumbled. 'He ain't given me a Hurgical Knot. It's a Heries. Twenty-five, Ambylance. You can't put a Hurnkey on the forearm because of the radius and ulna.'

At any rate, he could talk again after a fashion. Tincture of myrrh stood with the medicine bottles on the bedside table, and he explored his mouth with his tongue frequently. The front part of his hair was sleek from Halsey's comb, the back tufted up by the pillow. His unhurt hand was behind his head, and the slipping-down of the grey sleeve showed the slender, girlish arm. Hal placed the tray on the little bivouac made by his knees.

'Eat that. Then I've one or two things to say to you,' he said.

Clarry quickly got to the bottom of the bowl of bread-and-milk. Halsey carried the tray out and returned. He closed the door and glanced at the still fire. Then he folded his arms along the rail at the bed's foot and looked long at Clarry.

'Name?' he said at last.

'Moss. Clarence.'

'Not Taylor?'

'No. I was going to tell you.'

'Address?'

'Field Street, Fulham Road.'

'Not Southampton Row?'

'No.'

'How did you come to get yourself all messed about like this?'

Clarry made no reply.

Halsey repeated the question.

'Did you get it in Birmingham?'

Clarry answered, if it could be called an answer. 'All right, guv'nor. I saw you with *him*.'

'You saw me with who?'

'Him they call B.-J.'

'That isn't telling me how you got yourself smashed up. You were all right when I saw you. The next thing you're lying out in a bathroom with your head bound up and a bucket of blood on the floor.'

'The human body,' Clarry said slowly and reflectively, 'holds more than twelve pints of blood.'

What, he wondered, was this guv'nor of his getting at? Was he setting a trap to see if he was the talking sort? This Mr. Halsey Vibart had been with B.-J. in that lounge place. He had been still with B.-J. when Clarry had regained consciousness a good many hours later. Then why was he trying to put it past Clarry like this, as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth? If B.-J. was in it, Mr. Halsey Vibart was in it, too. And suddenly Clarry decided to cut the knot. He worked himself up into a sitting position. The light above his head cast deep shadows under his brows, in which his eyes moved brightly.

'Do something for me, will you, guv'nor?' he said.

'What?'

'Them trousers on the chair. Just put your hand in the pockets.'

Halsey took up the trousers. He felt first in one pocket, then in the other.

'Try the hip pocket. It's a bit of metal about as big as a pencil end.'

'This?' Hal held it up.

'That's it. Have a look at it.'

Halsey looked. 'Well?' he said.

'Keep it in your hand, and sit down while I tell you.'

Halsey took the bedside chair, tilting it back on the balance till his head rested against the wall.

Residents in the Woburn Place hotels looked up from their bridge, asked one another mildly what was happening to the electric light that evening, and then went on with their game. Bloomsbury students read on without noticing the momentary interruptions, in the streets the carbons of the arc-lamps gave a tiny hiss and splutter that nobody noticed. Clarry was talking, stumblingly and earnestly. As for Halsey, he merely sat there, his hands deep in his trousers pockets, his support the two hind legs of the chair and the back of his head against the wall. He had tossed aside the incriminating pin, which lay in a fold of the bedclothes.

'They loose your wheel-nuts, too, but it don't take a minute to run over them. And emery in your oil. But that's a bit of hacksaw work.'

Halsey spoke, but in an odd sort of way, as if somehow the matter didn't very much concern him. 'Pins wear out like everything else.'

'But *look* at it, guv'nor, *look* at it! Get your magnifying-glass to it!'

And Halsey, looking again at the regular minute markings, heard as it were a faint echo of Audrey's anxious voice, saying again, 'You don't suppose anybody could have got at the Bugatti?'

'So what about it, boss?' said Clarry, sinking back among the pillows once more.

'But,' said Halsey in the same odd tone, 'why didn't you tell me all this before?'

'I did, guv'nor, leastways I was going to,' Clarry earnestly defended himself. 'I was going to tell you that night, but you started talking about them spruces, and that murderer, and I hadn't ever had a treat like that before, and I was bringing you a new pin in the morning, and when I brought it, you went for me. Jumped down my throat proper, you did. Said you'd know better another time, you did.'

'Did I?' said Hal.

'I nearly wore my feet off. I'd a pair o' new shoes on, too. Three week-ends I hardly left this street, and I rung up them Vibarts' and they cut me off! Then Mr. Spencer said you wasn't in town.'

'Mr Spencer?'

'Him at Parkinsons'. You ask him.'

'Oh, I believe you,' Halsey thought it only fair to assure the lad.

'So now you know what they're up to at Raffleses,' said Clarry with dark meaning.

Hal, gently swinging his legs, pondered. He spent half his life in that Morris. He saw a picture of himself, sitting up in her, speeding along the pleasant country roads, unaware that he had an enemy in the world. He would as soon have thought of examining his food for poison as his car for slacked-off nuts and emery. Emery? Poison? They could give poison in small doses, couldn't they, so that it took time to act? With every breath a man drew something working deeper and deeper into his system, with every revolution his wheels made some crash drawing moment by moment nearer... yes, he could see that fellow, who was himself, sitting at the wheel there, whistling as he drove, perhaps, or thinking of his next customer.... Quite a spice it gave to life....

'But why Raffaeles'?' he asked at last. 'I was never there in my life till last night.'

'You *wasn't?*' said Clarry, with a mistrustful look.

'Never even heard of the place.'

'Then what about *him* — B.-J.?'

'Known him for years. We were at school together. But I haven't seen him for at least a year.'

'You ain't seen him for ——?'

'Quite a year.'

'On your solemn?'

'On my solemn.'

'Then what ha' you been up to?'

'Nothing.'

Again Clarry sank back among the pillows, closing his eyes. Blind Boy! What was a bloke to make of it?

But the fore legs of Halsey's chair came slowly down to the ground. The cause of their doing so was Clarry's last question. It was the identical question Percy had so promptly asked him — had he been up to anything? — and suddenly he remembered Percy and the letter.

That and the cutting of the pin must have happened at much the same time, possibly on the same day.

Hal sat gazing intently at the pattern of the bedside mat.

'Hm! It's odd you should ask that,' he said after a minute or two.

'What, boss?'

'If I'd been up to anything. Somebody else asked me that.'

'Who?' Clarry asked like a flash.

'Well, my uncle, if you must know. Something was worrying him, and he sent for me.'

Clarry was sitting up again. 'What was worrying him?'

'Well, he'd had a letter, and he thought it might have had something to do with a trip I once took to Russia.'

It couldn't have been good for Clarry's injuries that he should give the bound in bed he did.

'You once took *where?*'

'To Russia. I went there for our firm.'

'You mean — *Russia?*'

'Yes. We used to do a lot of business there.'

'But you only told me about that place where the spruces came from!' Clarry vehemently accused him.

'Well, I've been to Russia, too. What about it!'

What about it! Strike-a-light! Here was a bloke who'd been to Russia, actually been there, and never heard of Russian Gold! There broke from Clarry a rapid fire of questions.

'Did you see any of them crucifixions?'

'What crucifixions?'

'Ain't you read the papers? They crucify 'em there. Upside-down. And light fires under 'em, and other horrors not fit for decent print. Was you there on Red Sunday?'

'No.'

'Because that's all the use they have for Sundays in that place, to make 'em red. I got a picture of one of them priests. Their drainpipe hats and whiskers is enough to put you off. Did you see Rasputin?'

'No.'

'Because he's another shooting's too good for. Dirty in his habits and got round the Royal Family. Worse than a upspurrer, and magnetic eyes he'd got, and was irresistible to women. They're in common there, I suppose you know?'

'Who?'

'Women. I got a picture of them, too, carrying guns and their hair all dislevelled. One of 'em rose to be a sergeant in the trenches. Unsexed and proper. Lord, if I'd only known you'd been in *Russia!*'

Again the light flickered and burned quietly on, and the flicker seemed to underline the emptiness of the locked premises, the four silent floors beneath, and only Hal and the lad up there under the roof. Hal was thinking of the bullet-riddled timber again. When you began to look at life like that, it was like turning over a warm sunny stone and finding it all crawling underneath.

'Is your uncle's name Vibart, too?' Clarry was demanding.

'Yes.'

'Was it a letter from a agent-provoker?'

'I don't know. And by the way, you haven't answered my question yet.'

'What question, boss?'

'How you got yourself into that state.'

Crumbs, but he was a cool one, Clarry thought! *Was* he just brazenly lying, after all? Not that Clarry minded that in the least: to lie like a flatfish might be the simple and sensible thing to do. As a matter of fact, one idea and one only possessed Clarry. This was that he would have gone through fire and flood for this boss who put him into his own bed and gave him food and medicines and a pair of real pyjama legs to sleep in. And *if* Mr. Halsey Vibart was lying, and B.-J. was lying, and everybody was lying together, what closer bond could there be provided it was on all hands understood? Silence for Mr. Halsey Vibart about his uncle's letter, silence for Clarry about his broken head. It was the way of mutual respect.

Suddenly to Clarry's alarm his guv'nor was out of his chair like a cat. He flung open the bedroom door. He had left the next room in darkness; he switched on the light.

Nothing like a pair of quick ears. The drawer of his writing-table stood wide open and its contents were strewn across the desk and scattered over the floor.

Hal found himself doing exactly as the pale-eyed driver of the Bugatti had done. He was at the window, raising the sash, looking down below. For a moment the eye of an electric torch across the way looked back at him. Then it went out, and all was darkness again.

He was too late — minutes too late.

He closed the window and returned to the desk. He ran through his papers. Nothing appeared to be missing; apparently it was for one particular thing that somebody had been looking. Halsey stood in thought. Then, glancing round, he saw Clarry, out of bed, holding the pyjama legs about him in the doorway.

'What was it, guv'nor?' he whispered.

Halsey did not answer.

'I didn't hear nothing. Was you listening for something?'

'I thought I heard them come in. They were going out instead. You get back to bed.'

The eyes under the bandage were fixed on Hal's in a long unhappy look, and Clarry shuffled slowly away.

Systematically Hal began to search his room. On the mantelpiece, on the writing-table, here and there, were odd receptacles, into which he looked. He opened his flute-case; his flute lay there as usual. His cheque-book was untouched, and his keys had never left his pocket. But the idea of keys seemed suddenly laughable. With or without keys both his street-door and his upper door had been opened, and only the click of departure had brought Hal out of his chair with a bound.

And why had only one room been entered? Perhaps they had heard voices and had been afraid. Perhaps the bedroom was reserved for a later visit. He walked to the bedroom door, which stood open. He closed it from the outside, to see whether a light showed underneath. No light showed, and he opened the door again. He took a step into the room. The pyjama legs were on the floor and Clarry trying to get his trousers on.

'Here, what are you doing?'

Clarry's voice was steady, but tears stood in his eyes.

'All right, guv'nor. Hopping it. I didn't mean to let you in for nothing.'

'Don't be absurd.'

'It's all right, boss. I shan't take no harm. I've got as many lives as a cat, I have.'

'You get those trousers off again and the other things on.'

'No, let me go,' said the boy mournfully. 'It was arranged I was to be found a quiet job for a bit. I fancied a roadside cycle-shop. Like that Morris began in that makes the cars. You don't feel so lonely when a bit of road passes your door. You been lucky to me, you have, and I don't want to be unlucky to you. I can take my medicine in my pocket.'

But he tottered as he spoke, and Halsey had him back into bed again before he had said half of it. His car had been tampered with and his premises entered. He had no more idea than the man in the moon what it was all about. But he didn't see how it would help to turn a sick lad out into the street.

III

Hal was still not in the least tired. He had known far worse beds than a really quite comfortable couch with jackets and a dressing-gown to cover him. Still, where was Bigsworth-James? He sent his doctors and dentists and road-hogs round, but there was never a sign of himself. All that Saturday afternoon Hal had expected him. Surely he would come on the Sunday morning. Until he or somebody else did, Hal was tied by the leg, too, for after last night the lad could hardly be left alone in the place. And what about Hal's call on Audrey that afternoon? What about Monday morning, when he would have to be off into the country again? At half-past two on Sunday afternoon, Hal stood by Clarry's bedside.

'Isn't there anybody who could come and sit with you for an hour or two?' he asked.

Dared Clarry ask it, on the top of all the rest? He lifted wistful eyes to his benefactor's face.

'You ain't got a girl, have you, guv'nor?' he asked.

'No. Have you?'

Clarry dropped the eyes again. 'Soft impeachment admitted,' he said.

Halsey brightened up. 'Well, there you are. I could fetch her — unless you're windy about her going in that car of mine,' he added.

Had ever such a guv'nor worn shoe-leather before? As for the car, if the car was safe enough for Mr. Halsey Vibart to ride in, it was safe enough for Miss Lottie Smith.

And so the Morris picked Miss Smith up at her Chelsea address, and set her down again in Bedford Row. Hal got into his car again and sped away in search of his cousin.

The studio was in the quietest street between Kensington and Chelsea, and usually Audrey, who kept no maid, but spent three times a maid's wages on a succession of daily helps, opened her dark-blue door herself. But to-day it opened, and there stood there, not Audrey, but the girl in her early twenties who had worn that twilight-blue velvet wrap at Raffaeles' a couple of nights before. Two steps descended from the street, with a bright brass band to keep the grey hair-carpet in position, and she stood a little below him, holding the door open for him to enter. He stepped down, and she closed the door again behind him.

'You were to come in,' she said. 'She said she wouldn't be long.' And she led the way along the narrow passage to the studio at the back.

This, Hal thought, was a rather more pleasant turn for events to be taking. If he must be thrust neck-and-crop into the society of tamperers with cars, flat-breakers, or whatever else they might be, they might just as well be good-looking ones. Lovely he had thought her even in those first few moments; she was lovelier still by day. Naturally she was not now wearing that night-dim evening wrap. She was dressed in the simplest little grey frock imaginable, and it wouldn't have surprised him to learn that she had put it together herself. There was, in fact, a tiny thimble on one of her small fingers, and on the large sofa by the window that opened on the grassplot at the back an open workbox stood. But it was a large Parisian-looking doll that she was dressing, with a single garment on its body, and ridiculous little shoes, and legs faintly browned, as if it had played on the sands. What her own flower of a face seemed really to ask for was a saint's-day head-dress of some sort behind it, and a Dutch-looking skirt sticking stiffly out all round, and peaked red roofs or something else pastoral for a background and the Angelus ringing somewhere. Raffaeles'! And why had he never seen her at Audrey's before?

'I say, do let me introduce myself,' he said. 'I'm her cousin, Halsey Vibart.'

She had crossed to the sofa, curled herself up in one corner of it so that it was a wonder where half her young body had got to, and had resumed her stitching of the doll's undergarment. She seemed to be weighing whether his words needed a reply.

However, 'I know. She told me,' she said.

'Won't you tell me your name?'

That, too, she seemed to weigh. 'I suppose everybody calls me Bettine,' she answered, as if, that being so, he might as well be on the same footing as everybody else.

'Didn't I see you the other night?'

'If you mean Raffaeles', I go there sometimes.'

'You had rather a lovely evening cloak on.'

'Oh, it wasn't mine,' she answered, as if he mustn't run away with any wrong ideas like that.

But if she was taking little trouble to entertain him, she was there to be looked at, with the doll on her knees and the light from the window behind her making a sheen of her brown hair and catching the little rounded knees pressed together under the grey frock. But her mouth was moody and the droop of the full eyelids disdainful as suddenly, without lifting them, she said:

'You may as well tell me what she's been saying about me.'

'Who? Audrey?' he asked, surprised. 'She hasn't been saying anything about you. I didn't know' — and he laughed a little — 'I didn't even know there *was* a you.'

'Because' — and her lashes flickered for a moment in the direction of the refectory table — 'all that ——'

Halsey looked round the studio for the first time since he had entered.

'Hallo, is she off on another of her sketching-tours?' he asked.

For on the littered table, fresh from the artists' colourman's, new tubes of paint lay among the books and trinkets and letters thrust half back into their envelopes. A row of hog's-hair brushes set out in sizes looked as if Audrey had been amusing herself with their bran-newness. There were bundles of pencils, a box of *fusains*, a new palette-knife, and little capsuled bottles of oil and varnish.

The girl looked at them with disdain.

'People work with their old things, not with a lot of cream caramels like that,' she said. 'It's like everything else she does.'

'Oh!' said Hal, and shut his mouth again. Evidently there had been some sort of a women's row.

'Besides, every one knows that Rome isn't a painting-place at all. It's all archæology and measuring up *palazzi*.'

'I didn't even know she was going to Rome.'

'No, and neither does she yet,' Bettine answered, almost as if she hoped something might yet happen to prevent Audrey's going to Rome.

The street-door was heard to bang. There was a sound along the passage, and a voice that called, 'Has he come?' The studio door was flung open. It framed a poster for which two of the paint-tubes would have sufficed, the orange-cadmium and the ivory black. Fling those on with a large hand and you had Audrey as she was dressed this Sunday afternoon, in a long coat of tangerine flannel, with buttons as big as Jaffa oranges, and great pocket-flaps and a foot-high collar of glossy black waterproof. A skull-like *béret* sat close over her brows, and as she flung the vast garment wide open, the flaming hue went out as if water had been thrown on it, and a lining of shimmering beetle's-wing green took its place.

'To travel in,' she announced. 'I daren't tell you how much it cost; I'm half ruined as it is. Or *does* the *béret* make me look so like a headsman without his axe? How long have you been here, Hal? Has Bettine been looking after you? Bet, do be an angel and bring tea in.'

If there had been a quarrel, she had evidently forgotten all about it. She cast the coat over the back of a chair, and Bettine, without looking at Audrey, threw up her head and marched out. Audrey laughed as the door closed.

'Don't take any notice. She can be perfectly adorable. It's only the Alsace blood peeping out. Don't you think she's pretty?'

'You been having a row with her?'

'Not a row, but, you see, if I go away, she wants to come with me, and of course she can't. She'll be all right presently. And now, Hal, I'm *dying* to hear the news. I haven't seen a soul. She'll be going, and then we can talk. Perhaps I'd better go and give her a hand.'

And out she went after Bettine.

Halsey sat with his stick between his knees and his hat and gloves on the floor. From Alsace was she? She was utterly lovely, wherever she came from, lovelier even than before in that liveable-with little grey frock, with the half-dressed doll on her knees, curled up to nothing in the corner of the sofa. Too bad of Audrey to make a row. That evening wrap hadn't even been Bettine's, and that coat of Audrey's would probably have bought Bettine a dozen little frocks of grey. But why did she wear evening wraps that weren't her own? Well, girls didn't seem to mind wearing one another's clothes. Hal prodded at a rug with his stick. He had pushed the rug into a crease, and was trying to flatten it out again with the point of the stick, when there came a push at the door, as if somebody carrying something asked to be let in. He rose and opened. It was Audrey, carrying the tea-tray.

'Bettine swallowed a cup and went,' she announced. 'She swallowed the tea, of course, not the cup. And I'm not going to let anybody else in.'

She busied herself with tea-things. She pushed a couple of cushions against the sofa-leg for her back, set her own cup on the floor, and crossed her long legs under her. She gave herself a final shake down.

'And now — *avanti!*' she said.

'What about?' he asked, still prodding with the stick.

'Everything,' she answered promptly. 'Everything from the moment when B.-J. told me it was you he wanted, not me. To begin with, where is he?'

'B.-J.?'

'No, dear idiot, that boy. I don't know his name, but, oh, I could hug him!'

'If you mean that lad who seems to have gone to Birmingham with two men who looked like cracksmen and a couple of bags of burgling-tools, he's at this moment in my bed with a Surgical Bandage round his head,' Hal replied.

'Oh!' She clasped her hands and twisted her brows. 'Is he *much* hurt?'

'Hurt enough for an uncommon amount of interest to be taken in him. There have been more people up and down my stairs this last two days on his account than there have been in the last three months.'

'Tell me quickly who's been,' she said, shooting out her hand to his knee.

He began to count them. At the mention of the Roman Catholic doctor, she nodded. 'Yes, Willie Wishart.'

'And at the present moment his young woman's holding his hand.'

'But — but — how does he come to be in *your* place?'

'Half a minute. I haven't finished with the visiting-list yet. How many's that? Four? Five? Anyway, I let those in myself. But I'm hanged if I let last night's one in.'

'What last night's one?'

'Well, not to waste any words about it, somebody got in and opened my desk and went through my papers.'

'Hal!' she exclaimed, shocked. 'They *didn't!*'

'That isn't all. Do you remember saying something about a Bugatti the other night?'

'There was a Bugatti, but I don't remember saying anything about it.'

'You said something about something happening to a Bugatti. I don't care what happens to Bugattis. I haven't got one. But I should like to know why they should try to do *me* in.'

'To do *you* in!' she echoed, and there was no mistaking the genuineness of her surprise.

'Yes. My Morris.' And in as few words as he could, he told her.... 'Next ——' he was going on.

'You don't mean there's *still* more to come!' she said faintly.

'There is, but I'm not quite so sure about this. Have you seen Percy lately?'

'No.'

'You don't know anything about a suspicious letter he got?'

'No.'

'Well, he got one, and he took a lot of persuading that it had nothing to do with Russia.'

'Why Russia?'

'Exactly. By the way, isn't that a Russian grammar on the table there?'

Instantly he saw her guard go up. 'Oh, that! Yes. It's Bettine's. Translation's her job, you know. But' — and the guard remained up in spite of her laugh — 'you aren't suggesting that Bettine's writing letters to Uncle Percy, are you?'

'What does she translate?'

'German mostly. As a matter of fact, she's only learning Russian. Perhaps you saw her Russian teacher with her the other night. Incidentally he's a Prince. Look ——' and, springing up, she reached the book from the table in order that he might see for himself. It was 'Forbes's Elementary Grammar,' and stuck between the pages of it were Bettine's exercises.

'Where does she do her translation?' he asked. 'In those bedrooms where the typewriters are?'

She got up and began to walk about, talking as she went, the Russian grammar still in her hand.

'It's all *too* astonishing, Hal! I think you ought to see B.-J. about it at once.'

'I very much want to see B.-J.'

'And as for its being romantic — first that boy saving your life and then your saving his — or very nearly that ——'

'What are you going to Italy for, Audrey?' he asked.

'Eh?' She wheeled round. 'To do a bit of sketching, of course.'

'Bettine was just saying there wasn't much painting in Rome.'

'I tell you she's cross because she can't come, too.'

'She says you don't even know yourself whether you're going. You're your own mistress, aren't you?'

'You saw the temper she was in.'

'What's her other name?'

'Frühling.'

'What was she doing at that place — Raffaeles'?'

'Hal, this is London. You're becoming a stuffy country cousin. Every one goes to clubs.'

'Do you call that a club?'

'Hal, I want to warn you.' She did so, with an admonishing finger. 'You're not to go falling in love with Bettine.'

'I think you might find a better place than that to take a young girl to.'

'*I* take her! But it's her job!'

'Where does she live?'

'Oh, she doesn't live at Raffaeles'.'

'Where does she live?'

'Hal' — again she shook the finger — 'I've warned you.'

He was angry. He hadn't said anything about falling in love with Bettine, and another thing returned to him that he had noticed at the time and forgotten again. B.-J. had let fall that inadvertent 'dear.' Hal didn't for a moment suppose that his cousin's life had been without its adventures. Probably a dozen men had admired her shapely largeness, her vividness, her readiness for escapade. But Gobbles — that would be a bit too bad. She would only make a pet of him as long as it amused her. Hal, too, had risen. He was standing by the refectory table, looking at those shop-new painting materials at which Bettine had grimaced. An open book lay by them, with a pencil-mark or two dashed down the margin. His eyes caught fragments of passages:

> His pseudonyms were as various as they were picturesque: Larose, Gaudebert, Vieille-Femme, La Besace.... He obtained his information through an agency stationed at Brest. ... Her eyes were blue, her nose aquiline but well-shaped, and disguised as a boy....

Yes, that was it: the old Christmas theatricals in another form. He remembered himself as a little chap, laboriously writing out the programme: *Maid Marian*, mother; *Will Scarlett*, Uncle Percy; *Friar Tuck*, father all stuffed out with cushions; but always Uncle Victor had been *Robin Hood*, making a leg in the limelight. That was where it came from.

'What's all this about?' he asked, looking up from the book.

'Oh, my Fauche-Borel! It's too fascinating. Fouché and Perlet and those people. I've been reading it aloud to Bettine.'

'Who had blue eyes and disguised herself as a boy?'

'Bettine has blue eyes, but I don't think she could disguise herself as a boy.'

'I was asking about the book.'

'They called her the Nymph. It's a lovely story. They sentenced her to death, but she managed to get away with it, and in the end the British Government actually pensioned her. It was just when Napoleon was going to invade England. B.-J. lent it to me.'

'Do you know where B.-J.'s to be found now?' he asked, putting the book down.

'My dear, looking for B.-J. just now is *rather* like looking for a needle in a haystack,' she replied.

'Why "just now"?'

'Then leave out the "just now." You can try the Boltons if you like. That's where he lives.'

'Why do they put his movements down in a note-book?'

'Do they, Hal?' She raised the thick brows. 'Then you're even less likely to find him, aren't you?'

'But I want to know what's to be done about that youngster. I've got to go away in the morning, and after last night ——'

'No, he certainly oughtn't to be left alone,' she mused.

He was going away in the morning. He was off in a Morris it might now be prudent to look over before he got into her. He was leaving a flat that was not quite so entirely his own as he had been accustomed to consider it. And B.-J., who called his cousin 'dear,' was apparently not to be found. Hal looked long and thoughtfully at Audrey.

'After all,' he said at last, 'he didn't invade England.'

'Who?'

'Napoleon. All that junk's no good to you, Audrey. I wish you'd chuck it.'

'What, not read a little harmless romantic history?' she scoffed.

'Yes, but don't try to make it, I mean. You might find it dangerous.'

Her eyes sparkled. He noticed what splendid teeth she had. 'And he's off into the country to-morrow,' she said into the air. 'Well, perhaps it's better.'

'How better?'

'Safer.'

'I do wish you'd let some things alone.'

She laughed as she picked up the vast orange-and-black travelling-coat. 'Oh, I didn't mean safe in that way,' she said.

'What, then?'

'I mean it might be safer than falling in love with Bettine,' she replied.

IV

Before Clarry had opened his mouth, Lottie knew that he was going to lie. He always attacked when he was in the wrong.

'Knocked down by a motor-car, that's what I was,' he swore. 'As it might happen to anybody.' And he leaned back in bed, watching the shapes the smoke took as it came from his puffed lips. She had brought him a packet of cigarettes.

'Oh, Clarry, I haven't seen you for a week, and now I find you like this!' she faltered. Besides, what truth could possibly explain Clarry's being in quarters so magnificent as these?

'Lucky for you I'm here at all,' Clarry returned. 'But that cove what knocked me down ain't heard the end of it yet. People don't get themselves knocked down in the street for nothing. Twenty quid this is going to cost him, *and* medical attendance. What are you going to have for a present? A fur coat?'

She believed him less with every word he said. Why, she had heard him brag that *he* didn't mind standing well out from the kerb, chatting with his companions, and let any motor-car touch him that dared! She didn't want a fur coat. She didn't want anything. She only wanted him to get a job, the same as the others.

'Not by instalments neither,' he went on. 'They're wore out by the time they're paid for that way. And kidding you, that's what I'm doing if you must know,' he confessed as the temptation to display his riches became too strong for him. 'I don't count my chickens aforehand, *I* don't.... He knew better than to take it into Court, *that* bloke did. He paid up on the nail. Wait while I show you something.'

Cautiously he inserted the fingers of his left hand under his strapped-up right arm. He glanced furtively round. Then from the injured armpit he brought out two ten-pound notes.

'Ever had one of *those* in your hand before?' he triumphed. 'There. Touch 'em. Signed by the Chief Cashier of the Bank of England. Touch 'em.'

But her heart was now quite in her boots. She hated that fair young man who had stopped in a car at River Street, Chelsea, and had asked whether Miss Smith lived there, setting her mother's heart on the go again. He'd got hold of Clarry and was leading him into bad ways. *These* rooms! *This* wealth! She sank to her knees at the bedside, thrusting the notes passionately away.

'Oh, why do you always tell me lies, why do you always tell me lies!' she moaned. 'I want you to come back home again. People haven't any business out of their right places! You've got into bad hands, and you don't take any notice of me any more!'

And this from her! Bad hands! Mr. Halsey Vibart's hands! He tucked the notes back into their place of safety again.

'Ho! Bad hands! After *your* Hoy Pollies, like shouting after people in the street! Here I bring you to a place that *is* a place, and all I get is bad hands! Haven't you ever heard there's a tide that if you take it at the flood you make your fortune?'

'I know I did wrong myself, Clarry, but it's more money than you ought to have,' she sighed deeply.

'It's a couple of tenners, that's what it is. It ain't the National Debt. I tell you spirit's what *you're* short of, my girl. Where would I ha' been without a bit of spirit? Spirit and taking a pride in your personal appearance! Let me have a look at your hands.'

Meekly she held them out. Her work at the laundry kept them perpetually clean.

'Not bad,' he conceded. 'Listen. When I came round after that bloke had biffed me with his mudguard and I recovered consciousness to find myself in this bed with my trousers off, *I* hadn't to worry whether my feet was clean! The King could ha' seen them if he'd wanted. Somebody might run *you* down one of these days, so you see you're all right underneath and not just where the heart doesn't grieve. And try to live up to your surroundings a bit more.'

'How did you come to be here, Clarry?'

'Here? Why not? It ain't the first time I've been in this house. He's a friend I do business with. I do his car repairs for him. That was the car, the Morris he fetched you in.'

'I can't tell you the turn it gave Ma.'

'The whole world ain't coming to a climax because of your ma. Had you ever been in a car before?'

'They've told me about it, the girls have. Cars slow down and they often get asked. Are you staying here long?'

'Look at me. Have a heart. Till doctor's orders.'

'Promise me you'll try to get a job when you come out.'

'"Come out"! It ain't a prison. It's a gentleman's flat. And who wants work, the way *you* mean? Work ain't a object in itself. It's what you get for it. If you can get it without, good for you. Now I'm tired and my humerus hurts me. If you're so fond of work, you'd better go and do a bit. He ain't washed up. I was listening. You go and do it for him. Then it'll be time for tea.'

She took his hectoring very humbly. She knew that she had sinned, but she had confessed her sin both to the Lord Jesus and to Clarry. When she said her prayers, she sometimes screwed her eyes up so tight that she blinked for minutes after she had got up from her knees again. Some notice was bound to be taken of that. Already it seemed another girl who had carried those letters and whispered those shameful countersigns. So she felt herself almost forgiven and the rest depended on her meekness and submission and her willingness to forgive everybody else. She supposed she ought even to forgive this fair young man who was leading Clarry astray. To forgive him, but of course to hate the wrong he did. It was all very hard, because Jesus seemed to be both inside her and a very long way off. And He had washed Peter's feet. Clarry's feet didn't need washing. At any rate, she could wash up the gentleman's knives and forks. They ought to be cleaned, too; gentlemen who did for themselves sometimes let things slide. She had hardly dared to look at him in the car, because of what the girls had said, but he had hardly opened his mouth, except to say that there was nothing to worry about. The kettle was on the point of boiling. She spread newspapers on the table and filled the enamelled bowl. In the cupboard she found a half-tin of powder and some cleaning-rags. It was really her own past wickedness that she was cleaning away. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. If she was whiter than snow, even Jacob wouldn't dare to touch her.

So she washed up and polished the knives and forks and hung the dishcloth over the edge of the cupboard door to dry, and looked round to see if there was anything else she could do. As Clarry had the only bed, she supposed the gentleman slept on that couch; she shook up its cushions and folded his dressing-gown neatly at the foot of it. She scalded out the teapot. There was bread-and-butter, and as Clarry was staying with him she supposed it would be all right to cut some if she was careful with the butter, but she oughtn't to open the tin of sardines, though the key was there on its little tongue of metal. The eggs, she expected, would be for breakfast.

And then, as she moved to the kettle, she saw the envelope on the mantelpiece.

She almost screamed aloud. It couldn't, mustn't be! God, who was all-powerful, mustn't let it be!

But there it was, in plain typewriting: 'H. Vibart, Esq.,' followed by the address.

She clutched wildly at cruel, impossible hopes. There must be lots of people of that name. It was somebody else's letter. She was dreaming it, because of her conscience, and she would wake up and it would have vanished again.

But there it remained, just an envelope with a name on it lying on the mantelpiece, but implacably the same name. She was living that dreadful midday all over again, looking up at the name on the office window — 'Vibart Sons & Co.' — climbing the short stairs, approaching the counter, saying in a voice not her own that the gentleman was to have it as soon as he came in, and then taking to her heels as if Satan was after her.

Oh, when one had once committed a sin, did it go on for ever and ever, no matter what one did?

Her hand was poised over it. She made a swift clutch at it and turned it face downwards. She stumbled to the sofa and fell on her knees and tried to pray, but she knew that Satan was making up the words for her. He was telling her that nobody knew but herself. If they did find out, she had only to tell a lie about it. It wasn't the people who carried the letters who ought to have the blame, but those who wrote them. She had never wished anybody any harm. Oh, please, God, please! And as she knelt, there was the sound of a key in the outer door. The sitting-room door was pushed open, and young Mr. Vibart himself stood there. She heard his muttered 'I beg your pardon' as he drew the door to again. She rose from her knees. The burden of sin was fastened on her again just as she had thought to enter the wicket gate. If God wouldn't be her friend, Satan must. Nobody knew. Nobody could know unless she told them. If they asked her, she would tell the lie.

Hal felt horribly shy at having caught the girl at her prayers. He was standing in his own little entrance lobby, overcoated, hat in hand, as if he had just looked in for a minute, while one of his two rooms was turned into a sick-chamber and in the other a girl was saying her prayers. Somehow prayers were beginning to seem a little beside the mark. He didn't actually wish that he had left the lad to his fate, but while the Good Samaritan was all right in the parable, there was something to be said for the two who had passed by on the other side. And he couldn't tell the girl that the real reason why Clarry couldn't be left in the place alone was that rough hands might be laid on him. Of course, the door could be barricaded from the inside, but hang it all, people didn't turn their homes into fortresses nowadays! Nor was Hal going to be kept standing on his own doormat like this. He strode into the bedroom. In a few moments the girl followed him, and in a few curt words Hal pointed out the difficulty.

'Seven o'clock in the evening is the very earliest you could do?' he asked.

'Yes, sir,' said the trembling girl.

'You couldn't manage to look in in the middle of the day?'

In silence she shook her head. There wouldn't be time for that even if she took her meal on the bus-top.

'And you don't know anybody else?'

'No, sir.'

'Then the sooner somewhere else is found for him the better,' said Hal.

With a deep sigh of suffering, Clarry drew attention to himself. His hand made a movement towards the tincture of myrrh bottle, and Lottie got him the necessary utensils. But she was not deceived. Clarry knew a good thing when he found it. Clarry would not be moved anywhere else if he could help it. He would play up. He would get himself a temperature. He would take his bandages off on the quiet and have a relapse. He was making agonised faces now as he washed out his mouth. She moved away with the basin of rinsings, and suddenly Hal followed her into the next room.

'I'm awfully sorry, but you see how it is,' he said.

She made no reply but to gulp. Something undoubtedly ailed her. All at once she clasped her hands together. The pale mouth was out of control.

'Oh, sir! Where did he get it?' broke from her.

'Get what? Get hurt?' Hal asked. How the devil was he supposed to answer a question like that?

'All that money — you can't believe what he says — he's got a lot of money and he says it's for being knocked down by a motor-car ——'

Halsey was about to reply that if Clarry had a lot of money, he had better take himself off to a nursing-home when there was a ring at the street bell. He opened the window and looked down.

At last! It was about time Cyril Valentine Bigsworth-James put in an appearance!

V

It was into Lincoln's Inn Fields that Halsey Vibart and B.-J. walked that evening, round by Carey Street, and back to the north side again. No, the Goblin protested with sincerity, he hadn't left Halsey in the cart. He'd been away at a Conference and hadn't been back in London two hours. In fact, he had only missed Halsey at Audrey's studio by ten minutes.

'You say you've been to Audrey's to-day?'

'I came straight on from her to you. Of course, I wasn't going to let you down like that. — To go on about young Moss. There's this fellow Blanchard, used to do hospital-orderly. He's quite stupid and honest. So if you really don't mind, and could do with the brat a few days longer, and didn't mind letting Blanchard have a key ——'

Hal wanted to laugh. 'A key!' he said derisively, and the Goblin gave a serious little nod.

'I know. Audrey told me. They were on to it right away, the very next night. She told me about your car, too. I don't mind saying I was relieved in a way. You see it lets me out.'

'How lets you out?'

'Well, if it had been simply that affair of the other night, I should have felt rather bad about it, but seeing they'd had a go at you before ——'

This was a little too much for Hal. B.-J., having let him in for all this, was now calmly washing his hands of it on the grounds that Halsey had already brought it upon himself.

'Yes, who?' he broke out. 'Who had a go at me before? You seem up to your eyes in it. Who had a go at me before? Damn it, I've a right to know!'

Less than half a mile away he could have had his answer.

'Open it!' the woman who looked like a streetwalker but wasn't was repeating scornfully. 'You can open that sort with a hairpin! And what could he have done — to a woman?' She gave a derisive laugh. 'He'd have walked into my husband and Bob Parratt if he'd come down!'

'There's too much of the damned kid-glove business,' a voice growled.

'There wasn't ever a chance of its being there.'

'We don't know that it isn't there now. You've forgotten that time at Tilbury Docks, but *I* haven't! Not my only brother! He was aboard before they'd got the gangplank down, and he knew where to look. Accidental Death they brought that in, said he tripped and fell into the hold and broke his neck. Perhaps he did! But don't tell me those two don't know something between them!'

'The young one's been out of the business getting on for two years.'

'Then what's he doing thick as thieves with all that lot?'

'Bella's right. They want the gloves off, some of 'em,' the other voice growled again.

The cellar was furnished like a dugout. Old brown army blankets covered its already boarded windows, an oil stove with a smutty square of red talc warmed it, and three or four candles, one of them in a beer-bottle, were its murky lighting. Of its half-dozen seats four were boxes, and on one end of the deal table stood a typewriter in a black case. A flight of almost vertical wooden stairs rose from the adjoining cellar to the shop above. Jacob Cossar, his thighs supporting his stomach and his hands on the arms of his chair, was leaving the talking to them. Now and then he looked from one to another, and his spectacles gleamed as he moved his head. A man with a worn and studious-looking face had taken up the word.

'Don't go bringing all that up again, Bella. This eye-for-an-eye business is all wrong. It only splits us up into private feuds. Cells, Cells, Cells all the time — organising's what we ought to be doing, not having it in for this person or that.'

The woman wore a long brown raincoat, and an edge of white showed at her low-cut neck. Her eyes flashed under her wide black hat.

'Tripped and fell down a hold and broke his neck!' she mocked. 'Nobody gave him a push — oh, no!'

'The blood of murders was never the seed of any church,' the earnest man replied. 'We've rough stuff to handle, and if discipline goes, it's good-bye. The war ought to have taught us that.'

'There's others fought in the war besides a lot of blasted temporary officers. I was one. You keep that talk for your platforms, Parratt.'

'I tell you we want to win over more of that class instead of making enemies of them. What's Miss Constantine and Miss Tizzard been worth to us? Their weight in gold you can call it. They've got a way. People listen to them. *I* ought to know!'

And the speaker leaned back with the weary expression of a man who has had to fight every inch of his way, to educate himself at free libraries and evening classes, to join vehemently in public debates and skimp himself for his little library of history and translated classics, only to find in the end that there is no such drug in the market as mere native brains, and that a stroke of luck or an accident of birth is worth the lot.

Jacob's spectacles gleamed again. At the sound of his voice they stopped talking.

'Who's where to-night?'

A pale red-haired youth sat behind the typewriter. From a drawer in the table he took a folder of papers. He read out names, duties. An A.A. patrol had to be relieved, a private house watched. There was an assignation at an all-night café, and an ear had to be at a certain telephone at a certain time. It is all dusty in the files to-day and not worth disinterring.

Jacob's voice sounded again.

'Raffaeles'. Those waiters. Any new ones?'

'No.'

'Any absence more than a night off is to be reported,' Jacob ordered.

The red-haired youth made a note of it.

'Griggs.'

'Here.'

'You're speaking at East Ham to-morrow night instead of McGovern. On picketing. As fiery as you like.'

'That's the stuff,' growled the man who wanted the gloves off.

'Parratt. Lobby of the House at eleven-thirty to-night. Headquarters. You know what for.'

'It's a mistake, it's a mistake,' muttered the man called Parratt.

'It's your orders,' Jacob replied, and lapsed into silence again, his stomach on his thighs and his hands on the arms of the chair as before.

The woman called Bella was brooding over her brother again, her chin between her fists; the candlelight caught her knuckles and her wedding-ring. It gleamed on the curve of the typewriter-case and on the shoulder of the beer-bottle. It showed the corrugated face of the man who didn't want an eye for an eye, but Cells instead. He was making another appeal.

'You talk about Direct Action, but it isn't action. It's reaction. We're beginning to think more of our catchwords than we are of our facts. You know where I'm just back from. I'm back from the miners and ironstone workers. Not a day's work since the Armistice, nor likely to be. There's villages and villages of them, rent-free in the Company's houses, a bob or two unemployment-pay, and their clothes begged for them by the parson, and eating what falls from the carts and what's washed up on the shore, men that thin you could read print through them, and children, my God, with scrofula and rickets and bandy-legs and ringworm till you'd almost think it a mercy if a plague took them off.'

'We know all that ——'

'Give me something that'll clean *that* up and you can call it what you like. But blind revenge won't do it. There's Ireland. Let them find you with a revolver and you're shot without trial. They shot sixteen the other day. Then the other side shoots sixteen to square it. Where's the sense? If I'm to talk about picketing, it won't be twisting men's arms and frightening their women. It'll be ——'

'Better send somebody else, Jacob. His heart isn't in it.'

Then Bella's voice. 'They can frighten some women, but they can't frighten me — a whiff of chloroform'ld keep Master Moss quiet.'

'You can have the pair of them out of that flat without that,' said the man who wanted the knuckle-work to begin. 'I've been a rent-collector among other things.'

'As well you didn't try to collect any in some places we know,' somebody remarked.

'Those are offices, I tell you, and there's such a thing as the Inhabited House Duty. Also the Sanitary Authorities. And there's firms would like to know what their employees do in their spare time.'

The man who was striving for peace groaned. 'Oh, my God, and they call this a Cause!... You couldn't hang a dog on what you have against either of them. Even supposing our comrades over the water hadn't made mistakes before. It's a job to make out their letters sometimes. Somebody gets a name wrong, remembers a face wrong — don't forget the mistake that was made about Warburton.'

'Don't forget the mistake that was made about my brother.'

Again Jacob's voice rasped out.

'Who do you say that artist-woman is?'

'His cousin.'

'Have we a *dossier* about her?'

'No.'

'Then see there is one. That little blue-eyed witch Where is she now?'

'In Camden Town at present.'

'Who is she going about with?'

'The Russian. The one they call Papa.'

'Is she living with him?'

There was a pause. It was Bella who answered 'No.

'With anybody?'

'No. I wouldn't say she doesn't lead them up the garden path, but I don't think she lives with anybody.'

'Headquarters would like to know about her passport. How she lives, where she gets her clothes, anything else ——'

Somebody held up a warning finger. 'Listen!' From the head of the stairs a voice had called.

But it was only the quavering voice of the old woman minding the shop, wanting to know where the snuff was kept.

In the cellar the candles continued to gutter, the paraffin stove to smell, and the gathering to discuss its affairs.

As they continued to walk round Lincoln's Inn Fields, Halsey was wondering why he had ever supposed he knew anything about Cyril Valentine Bigsworth-James. A certain amount he understood. Obviously this little figure with the big head had not been able to walk into a recruiting-office with the rest of them. There had been no ready-made job for him, and when one had been made, it had been the oddest of all. Hal thought of that job again as, turning their backs on Carey Street, they took the east side of the Fields; the appalling loneliness of those descents by night with the pigeon-crate strapped to his shoulders, and no safety below, but only greater perils still; no court-martial, but a firing-party and the nearest wall; no nationality even, but only another Belgian peasant gone west. Against all his disadvantages he had only had his wits to set, the eyes that seemed to look round the back of his head, and that photographic memory. ... And now, to-day? With the war over and no more pigeon-rings to counterfeit or messages to forge?... Hal had never felt any grudge against the war or any of its settlements. Except that he sometimes thought that anybody who had had much to do with either must be very tired and in need of a good long rest, he had never troubled his head. But here was the Goblin, walking round and round Lincoln's Inn Fields, talking about the Trade-Unions with their true-blue heads and crimson tails, restive about their solemnly guaranteed *status quo*. Here was the Goblin, talking about the temporarily great bargaining for their honours and the eternally middling massing themselves quietly together again. And, most significant of all, here was the Goblin talking about the Continent as if England was only a little bit geographically broken off from the mainland, to be reunited to it by knowledge and understanding to-morrow. To hear him talk, one would have said that the war was merely a noisy incident, and the real struggle, the only struggle that mattered, and the struggle that mattered to everybody alike, was still to come.

And was this England, that he should hint at *dossiers*, and people's movements, and whether a man was easy to get into conversation with, or drank, or was attracted by women?

'But I wish your uncle hadn't lighted his cigar with that letter,' he broke off to say at one point. 'It might have thrown a little light on things.'

'They seem to need it,' was Hal's grunted comment.

'And I'm not sure that young Moss's girl ought to be with him. Many a man's been tracked through his girl.'

'I was wondering when you were coming to the girls,' said Hal, without much expression.

The Goblin seemed uncomfortable. 'I know,' he said. 'And if you mean Audrey and Italy, I don't want her to go. I hate her going.'

'Does it rest with you whether she goes or not?'

'To a certain extent it does.'

'You won't mind a purely personal question, will you? You are — that way — about Audrey, aren't you?'

It was a long time before the Goblin answered. When he did so, it was with quite a light sigh.

'It wouldn't make any difference. Leave me out. There are plenty of other things a fellow can do. I've got a couple of war-pigeons at home I'm very fond of. Blue cocks. They made me a present of them. We've had a lot of adventure together, those two birds and I. And I say — a sandwich is all I've had since breakfast — we can talk and eat, too.'

But it would make this difference. In love as in war the poor old Goblin might be left out, but if Audrey wanted to go to Italy, and the decision rested with him, go she would.

CHAPTER IV

I

Bettine Frühling sat in the third-class refreshment-room at Victoria Station with a piece of cake, a banana, and a glass of milk before her, and a young man standing at the bar shifted his foot on the brass rail and lingered over his drink. It was more than likely that he would presently follow her out, hang about on the chance, and do one or other of the things they invariably did. It was half-past one of a Saturday afternoon, and Audrey's train left at two. Bettine would then return to her lodgings in Camden Town, pack up her things, put them into a taxi, and transport them and herself to Audrey's studio. There, at any rate, no ornamental text would look down on her from the wall, perpetually reminding her that God was Love.

God, Love! She wondered. If it was so, then indeed He was everywhere. She read the thoughts of the young man at the counter without even looking at him. Corking little lovebird in the red leather coat. Dinky. Wonder if she's waiting for anybody? See which barrier she takes and buy a platform-ticket.... And without lifting an eyelash she answered his thoughts. No, thanks, not on a motor-bike. You can't see through my glove whether I have a ring on or not. Now I'm putting the other glove on. Besides, I don't like them pale and with red hair. Men are a bother, anyway; are exactly alike, but amusing sometimes. Yes, I am like that without my clothes. You'll see me stand up in a minute; I'm five-foot-five. Now you can finish your drink.

She pushed away her plate and rose, and the young man followed her out.

Anyway, that side of it was better than the translation. The translation was sometimes so cut up and distributed that very little sense could be made out of it. But the other was full of variety, and B.-J., to be fair to him, knew how to ask her to go across to such and such a man and to be nice to him for half an hour or so, or to accept somebody's invitation to lunch or supper, without making her feel like one of those thousand girls who bloom for an hour or two in a restaurant or a theatre and droop on their stalks when they get back to their lodgings again. Identification-parades they might be, or to keep somebody out of the way while something else was going on elsewhere — she never asked. The worst of it was that it kept her in London, in England. Still, Audrey was lending her the studio, and in the mean time God was still Love, even in Victoria Station. She was passing the glazed showcase of West-End models, and the red-haired young man was keeping a parallel course past the one with the steamer in it. Afraid to risk it, she thought. How easy they were! It was a shame to take the money.

Steam rose in soft shocks to the grimy roofing, and the air was shot with pale sunlight from the masonry of Buckingham Palace Road. She looked at the piled luggage on the trucks and at the people dressed for travel. Oh, to stretch one's self on a *couchette* and sleep, hour after hour through the rumbling hypnotising darkness, and to open one's eyes again in another country! Lucky Audrey with her hundred words of schoolroom Italian! Bettine must get on with her Russian. Already she spoke German as well as she spoke English.

She heard a step behind her and a man's voice in her ear, but it was not the young man of the refreshment-room. She turned.

'Oh, it's you, Lucca,' she said.

Lucca wore a suit the colour of a new golf-bag and an overcoat of the same material. He carried a bundle wrapped in a travelling-rug, and his brown hat was fresh from the shop. Audrey, of course, was travelling first-class, but Lucca would be only a little way along the train. As strong as a Tuscan ox he was, with very likely a razor in his pocket; a useful sort of bodyguard to have. She walked along by the waiter's side.

'Naples, Lucca?' she smiled at him.

'Si. Napoli. To my brother who keeps the barber's shop in the Via Roma. I eat my own pastries and ices again, Mees Bettine, and go to all the cinemas, and listen to the mandolins and the Quai Nova Santa Lucia, and help my brother with the shaving.'

'I expect you'll find changes.'

Si. In Napoli as elsewhere. But in his country they knew how to deal with a situation. And then a fat interior chuckle, and Lucca said something about castor oil.

But even now that she was joined by Lucca, the pale redheaded young man was not to be shaken off. He was still hanging about when they reached the Southern Station.

She saw Audrey's tangerine and black, conspicuous at the barrier. She was waving a Treasury note above the intervening heads, and with her was the cousin who had called that Sunday afternoon.

'Bet — do run and get me some change — our hands are full and we've nothing but English notes and lire.'

Bettine reached for the note and turned towards the bookstall.

Hal had come up from his beechwood villages and leisurely Corn Exchanges that morning, and he was at Victoria Station because Audrey had told him that Bettine would be there. He also knew that she was moving into the studio. People were pushing past with bags and bundles. A little way down the train stood a fellow in a snuff-coloured overcoat whose face Hal dimly remembered to have seen before, but there was no sign of B.-J. Bettine returned with 'Eve' and the change. 'You know Hal,' Audrey reminded her, and then went on to say something about a black frock.

'Because they say you cover yourself up almost as much for *him* as you do for the Pope himself,' she was saying. 'Oh, darling, isn't it *thrilling!* I just *can't* realise it! And what am I thinking of? Here's Hal. Why should you waste your money on taxis? Why don't you make him drive you up to Camden Town?'

'Take your seats, please ——'

'I'd better get in. The Bristol till you hear from me. I'll write as soon as I've a minute. Get all the books you want from the "Times" and make yourself ever so comfortable.'

Doors were closing, the row of seers-off fell back a little along the platform. Bettine had sprung up on the step. The two faces were pressed together in the window-frame and the deep cuff of the new travelling-coat made a glossy black patch on Bettine's red leather.

'Wish me luck — good-bye' — the train was in motion — 'au revoir, Hal ——'

'Bon voyage ——'

A minute later, Halsey was walking back to the barrier with Bettine by his side.

He couldn't make Audrey out. First she told him that he was not to fall in love with Bettine; then she gave him the tip that Bettine would be at Victoria to see her off; then she suggested that he and his car should do her removing for her. On the top of all that she had placed her studio at Bettine's disposal till her return. Nobody could say she wasn't making opportunities enough for him, and he wondered whether she had been serious when she had twice shaken her finger at him like that. But hang Audrey and her shakings. Here was Bettine, and in the other station was the car. He was not in the least nervous about the car. He no longer got into it without first giving it a rapid look-over and listening to the engine for a few moments, but he would be a bold fellow who tampered with a car at Victoria Station at two o'clock of a Saturday afternoon. He turned to Bettine.

'What about those things of yours?' he asked.

She dropped her eyes. 'Oh — it's troubling you.'

'Really not. Have you got much stuff?'

She looked up. 'Is yours a very big car?'

'They don't make them much smaller. A dickey two-seater.'

'I dare say it will be big enough,' she replied, and closed the lovely full lips again.

Across in the other station he put her into the car, and he hoped as he turned into the traffic-stream of Buckingham Palace Road that she would notice his driving. He rather thought he had 'hands' with that Morris. But up Grosvenor Gardens and across the corner into the Park she didn't speak, and he told her that she would have to direct him. With the red leather coat, which was partly open and reminded him of a tulip-bud, she wore a little black every-girl's hat, and as they sped along Oxford Street and into the Hampstead Road, he was thinking of that twilight-blue wrap again and of the face that had floated over it like a night-blooming flower.

At Camden Town she spoke.

'It's to the right by the Tube Station and left by the church. The dingiest street you can find,' she added, again locking her lips.

It was dingy, indeed. So cinder-hued and drab was the perspective of iron-railinged houses into which he turned that he almost wondered that she should know her own door; but she got out. She ascended three or four steps and put her key into the lock. He made the dickey ready for her belongings. His own suitcase for the week-end was already there.

The dickey was quite large enough; two journeys sufficed to bring down all she possessed. The third time she was gone a little longer, settling up with her landlady, he supposed. Then she reappeared and got in. He turned the head of the Morris out of that grim street and south again.

It was as they approached the Serpentine that he asked her whether they need go straight back to the studio. Her reply was that she had to go out that evening. Well, there remained hours yet. He took it that she meant 'All right,' and depressed the accelerator pedal without further discussion.

He had decided that Virginia Water would do, Virginia Water and the Great Park. From his Eton days he knew the paths and windings of both. Along the broad way of Holland Park, through Hammersmith and Chiswick, those sylvan villages of so few yesterdays ago, the car sped. There might be time for tea at the Wheatsheaf afterwards.

In little more than another half-hour, he had drawn up at the old coaching-inn and parked the Morris among the cars of half a hundred golfers.

Already she had drawn a deep breath, as if to expel the last particle of that cinder-hued street's air from her young lungs, and, as they passed through the wooden wicket and left the road behind them, she took off the every-girl's hat also, not to catch it in the low-sweeping branches. Ahead the ornamental Water could be seen, silver in the sun, with a line of swans convoying their cygnets majestically across it. He looked at her, and hoped she was aware he was looking at her. With her short brown hair blown back, dressed in that leather coat against all weathers, she looked suddenly right, walking along that sandy marge, keeping company with the swans. At the little wooden bridge they passed to soft turf, with glades of sycamore and Spanish chestnut and oak stretching to left and right. He was watching the knees that hit the red tulip of her coat, the little strapped shoes, the glint of eyes, the hair tossed back from the broad brow.

'Do you like London?' he suddenly asked. 'Don't you like this better?' — for London to him sometimes resembled a cockpit, with a mat in the middle of it, on which people scratched and fought with one another for a living, not even leaving it when the arena closed down for the day, but hanging about the circumference of its locked shops and offices, amusing themselves by artificial light till the doors were thrown open again. And he had seen the street from which he had just fetched her. Now the air was warm, birds building, rabbits making little scurries among the glades. A little way ahead of them a double-cherry lifted up its praise of white, like sustained treble voices in a choir.

Her answer to his question was rather startling. The cherry-tree was perhaps a dozen yards away. She took a quick little run to it. She cast her arms about it, pressed her cheek against its bark. He saw her pure face as he had once before imagined it, dressed for Communion, the crucifix at her breast, the Angelus ringing somewhere. He almost felt that he ought not to look. With closed eyes she leaned against the tree for perhaps half a minute while he waited.

Then she picked up her hat and gloves from the bracken again and they resumed their walk without speaking.

Georgio Tertio Patri Optimo Georgius Rex. Fifty feet the Equestrian Statue rises on its plinth of piled-up granite, the inscription half hidden by the oak and thorn and small-leaved ivy that pushes from its crannies, and below it is a Park, indeed. They stood looking over a golden and shadowless world. Dotted over the middle distance every copse and plantation and single tree stood eyes-front to the afternoon light. Deer and bracken were one, and straight as a ruler for the best part of an hour's tramp the Long Walk tapered away to the blue smoke of Windsor Town and the Castle that dreamed on its hill. For him all the pageantry of a proud race was woven into that tapestry of woodland and scattered ponds. Accession, Coronation, Jubilee, Victory, Royal Wedding, Royal Birth — hardly an oak among them but had its name; and that lordly Round Tower of the Conqueror's was the hub of an imperial wheel of which the spokes radiated invisibly to the ends of the earth.

But Bettine stood before it, saying nothing.

'The Walk looks topping with an escort of cavalry trotting down it,' he said a little wistfully.

'It's a lovely view,' she conceded.

'They call it the Copper Horse. It's pretty badly cracked they say. The poor old chap was a bit that way himself. He's our Eton Tin God, you know. You can't see Eton from here. It's behind the hill.'

'You were at Eton with B.-J., weren't you?' she suddenly asked.

'Yes.'

'He told me.' And again she gazed over the golden shadowless Park.

Of course, he couldn't expect her to see this English scene quite as he saw it. Hadn't Audrey said she was Alsatian? Alsace. That had been French, then German, and was now French again. It wasn't very easy for him to realise that either. There was something cosmopolitan in her eyes, too, and, looking at those gazing eyes, he suddenly knew what he wanted. He wanted to kiss her. And as he thought he knew what he meant by that, he wasn't ashamed of the longing. It could hardly be kissing for kissing's sake so soon after her impulsive little drama at the cherry-tree. Better no kiss at all than a kiss that did not deal tenderly with a secret spied out like that. And he wanted it the more that in a sense she was countryless, while he stood on the soil of his birth and of his young days, a soil that had not changed hands. He would have liked to adapt her to this soil, to himself and to anything decent there might happen to be about him; he didn't suppose he would ever see a cherry-tree again without remembering her cheek against it. And Audrey had lent her the studio, and it would be his own fault if that afternoon was the last time he saw her. To want to give a girl that kind of kiss was not a thing that happened every day of the week.

Suddenly she asked him how long it would take them to get back to London.

'I have to go out this evening,' she said.

It was as if at the words a tarnish spread over the gold of the Park. To go out? Who with? Into what company? Not back to that rotten place where he had first seen her!

'I have to go out with Papa,' she volunteered. 'No, not my father. I don't possess such a thing. Papa's Prince Sacha, my Russian teacher.'

'The man with the beard I saw you with the first time?' (The first time! And this was only the third!)

'Yes.'

'Must you go?'

'Oh, yes, I must.'

'To Raffaeles'?'

'I expect we shall go on there later.'

Over the Park and the oaks and the Long Walk and the Castle dreaming on its hill, a curtain descended. Painted murkily on it were those threadbare red stairs again, and a red-shaded lamp on the landing, and beyond it a room with grimy Victorian gilding and a mixed and suspect mob of people sitting at the tables. On the floor above typewriters chattered behind closed bedroom doors, and from a bathroom floated a whiff of ether. He saw her Papa, and the gleam of his tinted onion-rimmed spectacles. This

Papa, who was a Prince, lifted his thumb, and, tired as she was, she moved obediently away. Leaving a moving, orphaned, dryad-like little ghost behind her to haunt a cherry-tree for ever, she was going back to all that. Halsey cursed to himself.

She on her part found him quite nice so far. He had minded his own business in the car, which was to drive, and his hand hadn't accidentally touched hers as they had walked side by side. She had blue eyes and he hadn't told her how blue they were, and as for her sudden breakdown at the sight of the cherry-tree, she was furious with herself. It was only being all those months without seeing a blade of grass that hadn't an iron railing round it, and at this juncture of her life she couldn't afford to be sentimental. It was all right for Audrey. Audrey lent her the studio and promised to write her long letters and so on, but Audrey didn't know the underside of things, where the knots and seams and loose ends were. She had always been on the top side of the pattern. And the way to become a real flower was to take one's time about being a root. Bother the cherry-tree!

'Shall we be getting along?' She heard her own voice interrupting her meditation. 'I have my things to unpack.'

'We can be back in an hour.' This was Audrey's cousin speaking.

'Then I've got to change.'

'Are you really in such a hurry?'

Bother the cherry-tree! It was the last thing she had wanted to happen with this young man's eyes on her. It put things on another plane and made them all in a moment extraordinarily difficult. He might be the kind who took things to heart; really, B.-J. wanted rather a lot for his money sometimes! On the other hand, if what B.-J. said was true, this young cousin of Audrey's was safer 'in' than standing all by himself on the fringe of it.... A decoy? She pushed out her lips disdainfully. Very much the other way if she let herself get caught out like this at the sight of a few bunches of flowers! Besides, she scarcely lifted a finger, scarcely dropped an eyelid. It was God's being Love that did it.... And, oh, dear, already he *was* taking her seriously! She could tell it by the tone of his voice. He was asking her whether he might fetch her out to-morrow. Should she put the stopper on it once for all? There were plenty of ways. She could tell him that if she had known he was going to try to get an advantage out of it, she would have moved her belongings in a taxi. She could tell him that, as it was months since he had set foot in Audrey's studio with Audrey there, now that she wasn't there he had better wait till he was asked ——

'You see I only have Saturdays and Sundays to myself — I'm in the country all the week.'

She could tell him that she was going out to-morrow, which she was not, busy, which she was not, wanted to be alone, which would be the truth.

'As a matter of fact I've a couple of books of Audrey's I've been meaning to bring back ——'

God was beginning to be Love.

'How is it I never met you with Audrey before?'

He did it rather more nicely than some of them, but it was the same thing. She wished there could have been some other way.

'Do you know, the first time I saw you, in that place, I thought ——'

Well, things would have to take their course. It was her own fault, for seeing a cherry-tree, and suddenly gulping, and nearly breaking down altogether. They were approaching the tree again. He was walking more slowly. Out of the air itself she seemed to get what he intended to do. He was all but saying it, stammeringly, earnestly begging her to believe in the very thing she had not wanted to awaken, his sincerity.

'It isn't only that, if you know what I mean — it's ever so much more than that — I know it sounds stupid, but I can't help it — I knew the moment I saw you — Bettine — dear, dear ——'

And, after all, it was not as if she had not been kissed before. Perhaps — ever so little, but perhaps — it was that she had beeen kissed before. His brown hand was lightly touching the tree on the place where her cheek had rested. Not a soul was in sight. With his other hand he led her cheek to the rough bark, as if that was its proper place. Then he bent over her.

She hardly resisted, but of all the kisses in a kissing world that the sun looked down on that afternoon, not one was more strictly conditioned than theirs.

II

Hal was lucky in his job with Parkinsons'. Percy had got it for him in the days when Percy had still been somebody, and jobs of that sort were now becoming increasingly difficult to get. True, the Disposals Board was responsible for a thousand sub-sub-agencies and enterprises that all meant competition, and Hal found rather more barbed wire and rabbit-netting and buckets and shovels in the market than he had bargained for, but the late years had produced no great glut of churns and separators, and, a trickle through the Occupied Areas apart, English shops were not yet flooded with unfamiliar wares brought by the trainload across still-bleeding Continental frontiers. Therefore, Parkinsons' paid him five pounds a week and a commission. To this he could add a hundred-and-fifty a year of his own, with the capital sum in part available. There was always the chance that Vibart Sons & Co. would pull through. And his job kept him out in the open air, which he liked best of all.

But, 'What, London again, Mr. Vibart!' the manageresses and barmaids of his houses of call began to say. 'It's lucky to be some people, getting away whenever they like! When are you going to bring her to see us? Well, good-bye — if you can't be good, be careful.'

And a smile and a wave would speed him, for he managed to rub along pretty well with people.

He could hardly be expected to come up only for week-ends now. Moreover, Bettine had told him that week-ends were often her own busiest time. So he saw her next on the following Wednesday evening, setting aside a trip to Banbury in favour of one nearer to town in order to do so. They dined at a small restaurant close to South Kensington Station, and were the only two people in the place. She wore her every-girl's hat and plain little frock of grey, and the red leather coat was thrown over the back of her chair. They sat side by side, and his hand sought hers frequently. After dinner he was to take her to Audrey's door and leave her there, because she wanted to get to bed early.

It was a simple little story that he got from her bit by bit, in no way different from that of a thousand other girls. He had constantly to ask questions, for she was not naturally talkative, but when he did ask them, she answered without reluctance, and he remembered the stiff little pride with which she had directed him to her Camden Town lodgings in 'the dingiest street he could find.' So it had been with her war-years. She had neither father nor mother, and had lived in various places in London with an aunt. For air-raids there had usually been a Tube station somewhere near, and there she had taken shelter, always with a foreign book in her bag. There she had read, hating not so much the muffled thuds that had punctuated her studies as the shudders and sobs and prayers of the people packed so densely about her that her elbows were pressed into her ribs.

'Mostly it had to be a French book,' she said. 'If it had been a German one, I suppose I should have been mobbed.'

'Poor little darling,' he murmured, pressing the hand again.

'If I'd been learning Russian then, I suppose they'd have patted me on the head first and mobbed me afterwards,' she told him, the blue eyes looking across the restaurant, back on it all.

'What tripe it all sounds to-day, doesn't it?' he said. 'How did you go on about your name?'

'My aunt made me change it. She made me call myself Betty Spring. Fürhling's the German for Spring. But I changed it back again when I left her.'

'Why did you leave her, dearest?'

But to that he got no answer but a shrug, and he did not press the question. And, of course, she would have backbone enough to resume her own name. Bettine Frühling. Betty Spring. He compared them.

'I like the German one better,' he told her. 'And I believe Vibart's French orginally. Lots of English top-dog names aren't English at all. We're an awfully mongrel lot when you come to look into it.'

'I like some things about the English.'

'I should never have guessed you weren't English if Audrey hadn't told me.'

'I wonder what she's doing now.'

He made her look at him. There was a little habit she had better begin acquiring. 'You left out something, didn't you?' he smiled.

'What?'

'"I wonder what she's doing now, Hal — or even dearest Hal,"' he amended.

'Hal,' she said, looking down at her plate again; and very soon afterwards he took her home. She did not ask him in, and he didn't think he would have gone in if she had asked him. A kiss remained softly on his lips and a phantom hand lingered in his as he walked back to the Gloucester Road Garage where he had left the Morris.

An unannounced visit in the middle of the week affected Clarry Moss, too. Let us look in at Bedford Row for a moment and see how Clarry is going on.

Apparently he is well on the mend. He still wears his bandage, but there are signs that it has been taken off and put on again, intact like a hat, and not by a professional hand. He is still in bed, and not quite out of pain, if one may judge from an occasional frown or twitch of the mouth. But it can only be an intermittent pain, or he would hardly be giving a party, and he is giving a party. There are plates and biscuits and lemonade and a smell of cigarettes and oranges in the bedroom, and the guests are Lottie, Freda Horrocks, and the hospital-orderly, and they are playing cards.

Three of them take it in turn to deal, the non-dealer being Clarry, because of his strapped-up arm. With his left hand he negligently picks up the face-down cards, sorts them, glances at them, and puts them down again. A cigarette dangles from Freda's upper lip, and she has her beads and her scent on. She deals moistly and expertly, in the odour of the scent and oranges. Lottie picks up her cards one at a time, arranging them with slow care. Blanchard, the hospital-orderly, is a blond young prize-fighter who might have been a deaf-mute, so few words come past his lips. He would be a formidable customer for a male intruder to tackle, but his wits are none of the brightest, and he might be in doubt what to do if he heard steps in the next room and found that the intruder was a woman. If by inadvertence Clarry gathers up a trick that neither he nor his partner has taken, Blanchard's hand descends like a malt-shovel on the cards, and the error is rectified.

'Well, play if you're going to play,' Clarry impatiently urged Lottie. 'A ace can take only one trick.'

Lottie glanced timidly up. It was only a game, and she really didn't want the tricks if it gave Clarry such pleasure to win them.

'Is it my turn?'

'Oh, no, we all play at once, like grab,' Clarry answered sarcastically, and Freda took up the cudgels on Lottie's behalf.

'You stop nagging at her, Clarry Moss, sitting up there with that thing on your head like the King in his crown. Anybody'd think you owned the earth since you came here, calling a jack a knave just to show you're different to other people.'

'It's knave on Three Castles cigarettes, and it's knave in them problems in the evening papers,' Clarry answered. 'I should think the evening papers is authority enough for you.'

'He's nothing to do now but read the newspapers all day, crosswords and football-comps, thinking he'll win five pounds a week for life!'

'Well, somebody's got to win 'em, haven't they?'

'A lot of chance *you* have, with professional solutionists that do nothing else!'

'We can't all be Senior Wanglers,' Clarry returned loftily, and again Lottie played a card, thinking from the pause in the game that it must be her turn again.

Clarry knew what Freda was up to. She pretended not to be impressed by these surroundings, but he had seen her taking it all in, feeling the quality of things, turning up corners to see if there was a ticket, putting her nose in everywhere. She was egging Lottie on, spending his twenty pounds for him. Hire Furnishing, a deposit, and an instalment-millstone hung round Clarry's neck — that was their game. He'd watch it! That was the only idea women had, to get themselves off with some fellow, and chuck their own jobs after a month or two whether it was like that or it wasn't, and then to go on living on him. And here was Freda at him again.

'And it's him that's keeping everybody waiting now. Thinking of his old college-chum instead of the game, I expect.'

'Not so much of that,' Clarry haughtily commanded.

But the devil was in Freda that evening. Deliberately she mimicked Clarry.

'"Piano soundboards is made of spruce,"' she echoed him, and Clarry laid down his cards.

'You might be laughing a bit different before you've finished,' he said coldly. 'You've no imagination, you haven't. I hear things you don't hear in laundries.'

'The Germans cut the trees down in Tasmania or somewhere, and he's going to Canada to make his fortune!' Freda scoffed.

And Clarry sick in bed! They, who ought to have been making much of him, chivvied him.

'Ho! And what if I did happen to mention Canada?' he demanded. 'Ain't there such a place? Ain't friends of mine been there? You ain't ever been to the Eiffel Tower, but you can see the picture of it on the bottles, I suppose? That's what education's for, not to learn things in roundabout ways. How long has telephones been in?'

'Can't say, I'm sure,' Freda rewarded with a toss, puffing out a thin plume of smoke.

'And you get a ashtray, instead of dropping ash all over other people's places. Telephones was a new discovery once. Somebody's got to make 'em, and you can bet a bob it won't be your Alf!'

'My Alf'll discover me when the time comes, and that'll be discovery enough for him,' Freda retorted. 'Not to speak of if the cap fits. Mildly mental you're going; *I'd* show you if I was Lottie!... You to play, Image.'

The blond young bully played, and the game proceeded.

Lottie had known all along that that money would go to his head. He'd get well again, meet her one evening at the laundry gates, and tell her he was off to one of those places; and to Lottie the thought of going anywhere where ships went was like being suspended in one of those dreadful spaces between the stars.

Forests and rivers and murderers and piano soundboards were all mixed up in her head. Would he expect her to pack her things and go too? What about her mother?

Worse, he still stuck to his lie about the money. Even Freda couldn't find out the truth about where he had got it. How she envied Freda! Freda got away with things. Freda would never have slipped letters into the hands of strangers in the streets. She would have stood up to Jacob himself, telling him to throw his money where he threw his love. She had her Alf at the snap of a finger. But Lottie would never have Clarry at the snap of a finger. She knew he had no intention of going back to Sam and Mike and the lads of the Fulham Road. Had she spoiled him, kissing him so much? But she had wanted to kiss him. She wanted that little home so, and Freda said that if she didn't get it now she never would. She was playing her cards anyhow, just as they came. She put down a card. It must needs be the one card of all that she always dreaded to hold in her hand, the ace of trumps itself. With a little howl of disgust, Clarry flung his own cards in a shower across the bed.

'Raspberries!' he cried. 'As if revoking wasn't enough! Now she goes and trumps his trick! And they call them Ministering Angels Thou!' He sank back and passed his hand over his headcloths. 'Go and get me my hot milk after that. Blanchard, give me my medicine and punch my pillows up a bit. And you take my tip, you stop a man's man. There's no blooming end to it where there's women.'

And with his thumbnail on the graduation of the medicine-bottle he threw back his napkined head and swallowed the healing draught.

Obviously somebody would have to sleep on the floor. Halsey, appearing a little before eleven, didn't see why it should be himself. He went into the bedroom. He found an open window and a thinning odour of scent and oranges and cigarettes, and a strange razor-strop dangled from the knob of one of his drawers. He went into his sitting-room. A boxer's gaudy ring-wrap lay over his own dressing-gown on the couch, and somebody else's boots stuck out from a crumpled newspaper underneath it. The boxer himself stood in the little lobby, like a sentry in his box. Cups and saucers occupied different places in the cupboard, on the mantelpiece was a bottle of embrocation not his. Well, there would soon be an end of that episode. He might be quite frequently up in the middle of the week now. Doctors and night-drivers, dentists and visitors unknown, young Moss and his orderly, out they could clear, the lot of them. One afternoon soon he intended to give somebody else tea up there instead. Then if she liked the place, there it was; if she didn't, they would look for another. He took the gaudy wrap from the bed and the pair of boots from underneath and put them outside the door. Then he turned the key in the lock. Clarry and his pugilist might make what arrangements they pleased.

For when Romeo loves Juliet, who cares what the quarrel of the Montagues and the Capulets was all about? As Halsey switched off his light and curled himself up on the couch, that soft phantom hand stole back into his. Her full little good-night kiss was on his lips again, her voice was in his ears. When things like that happen to one, who wants either to go quite to sleep or to remain altogether awake? Poor wandering little heart, moving from lodging to lodging with a timorous aunt who made her call herself by another name! Lovely, studious little thing, her brows bent over her French book in a Tube full of hysterical people, with the anti-aircraft guns pounding overhead! Courageous little soul to have stuck it out, to have taken her own name back again, gone from job to job, even if so far it had ended in nothing better than B.-J. and his subterranean activities. He had drawn aside his curtains before getting into bed. The struggling light of the streetlamp below faintly reached his ceiling. It reminded him of the old night-lighted nursery at home. His mother was softly singing him to sleep again, some crooning contralto carol about a cherry-tree that had bowed down to Mary's knee, and as his mother bent over him to see whether he was off yet, the warm ghostly little hand slid into his again. The three of them being there together, himself and his mother and Bettine, seemed so right. It made life self-contained and whole. He dozed for a bit, but woke again to picture her in Audrey's bed, her brown hair not so long but it might have its unruly way on the pillow, her hand perhaps stealing in search of his, too. And Audrey had said he mustn't fall in love with Bettine! He dozed again, and again woke. They were in Windsor Great Park together, standing under the Copper Horse, and in his half-waking state one horse suggested another, and he had hired a couple of cobs and they were riding as he had ridden at Eton, and of course hers was a bolter, suddenly behind its bit, and he was dashing after her to seize the bridle....

And then it wasn't a horse, but a canoe, and he was showing her the turn of the wrist that clears the paddle, and there was a smell of wood-smoke and cooking supper, and those lake-like eyes of hers were lifted in wonder to the dark spruce-clad ranges and the far-away snows....

And then the canoe became a Morris, and he actually had brought her to see the barmaids and manageresses, who said, 'What, London again, Mr. Vibart! It's lucky to be some people!' Lucky? It was more than luck; it was Heaven's unstinted blessing. He saw Mrs. Protheroe of the White Hart making their room ready with her own hands, putting 'Reserved' on the little corner table in the coffee-room, Bettine in the market-places doing her bits of shopping, Bettine reading a book in the car while he saw his farmers and chandlers and general-store men. Bettine learning to drive ... and it really was time he got to sleep if he was going to be up early in the morning....

And as for the Montague and Capulet side of the business, Raffaeles', as we all know, put up its shutters a number of years ago. Against Raffaele himself a deportation order was made. Of the welter of plots hatched or laid bare in those bedrooms, one was published to the world, and there is an empty block of buildings in the heart of the City that no ordinary firm can afford to take. That was what the Montagues did to the Capulets, or else it was the other way round. The next time the Capulets will do it to the Montagues. But it is not on them that the burden falls. They are always ready with their answer. All our fathers were full of answers. And when Halsey married Bettine, and by and by a little son was born, Halsey would have to have an answer to pass on to him.

III

One of the string-tied cardboard boxes that Bettine had brought with her from Camden Town was still unopened. It contained only odds and ends, and there was no hurry about it. Nearly everything else was straight. She had begun with Audrey's things, which had been left thrust away anyhow, with hems and ends trapped in the closing drawers. She had carefully brushed and folded them all, setting them to the left of the cupboards and drawers. Her own things occupied the right. Her shoes stood in a short tidy little row along the bedroom wall. Never in her life had she had so much space to move about in. She loved the bath all to herself and Audrey's chafing-dish to cook whatever little messes she liked, at any hour of the day or night she liked. In the middle of one afternoon, dressing her doll when she ought to have been doing her Russian exercise, she remembered the box and fetched it from the bedroom. She put it on the refectory table, cut the string, opened it, and then stood wondering what had made her keep half the things it contained.

Loose beads and shells, a narrow belt of varnished leather from which she had removed the buckle, remnants of coloured sewing-silks that she had wound round her finger; a man's sovereign-case and an enormous dyed quill; half a packet of luggage-labels, visiting-cards, a nigger mascot with a gollywog head and foolish pink-striped trousers; in her haste to be off she had emptied them from the Camden Town drawer without looking at them. Now her fingers turned them over. That silly nigger, for example; why had she kept that? Only men kept things, and produced their letters and pressed flowers long afterwards, sitting up and begging for their fidelity to be noticed. Lucky for girls that so little made them happy! Why had she kept that mascot? She looked at it again, trying to remember some scene or occasion. Blank. It might have been any one of half a dozen. And so much for mementoes. She threw the meaningless thing across the studio, where it lodged limply against the unlighted stove. Then she returned to the sofa and the doll.

She was getting on with the dressing of it. Its legs were still bare and brown, as if it had played on the sands, but its minutely stitched chemise was now tucked into little short knickers, and with Audrey's paints she had changed its face, darkening it with blue round the eyes and adding little staccato dots of carmine to its mouth. She was making a sophisticated little hat of black velvet for it, copying it from a French paper. It was to be a present for Audrey when it was finished. She tried the hat on the doll. No, that was not what the French designer had meant. She took it off again and picked out the last stitches.

Men. Halsey Vibart, for instance. Why did she let him kiss her? Why did she sit for half an hour or more with her cheek against his breast, while every now and then his lips touched her hair? It was hard to say. Sometimes he asked her what she was thinking about, and she couldn't tell him because she didn't know herself. Men seemed to be in the way wherever one turned, and as they couldn't be shifted, they had to be got round. All but Papa. She thought of Papa, who fetched things in paper out of his pocket to eat in the Tube and pawned his emerald-and-diamond ring to hire her a frock for the evening — for sometimes he went where the pearl ropes and orders were worn; that was his department. She had only once tried it on with Papa. For a moment he had seemed amused; the next moment she had been more frightened than ever she had been in her life. If Papa wanted that kind of thing, he snapped his fingers and it came. It took an impoverished Russian *émigré* Prince, accustomed to a dozen different whips in the rack at home, to put God and Love in their proper places.

She was reshaping the black velvet hat, thinking of Papa, and wondering why she let Audrey's cousin kiss her, when the knock of the postman sounded at the end of the passage. Ah! Perhaps this time.... She ran.

It was. With such haste did she open the letter that she tore the Italian stamp across. It was on an ordinary folded sheet of the Bristol's note-paper, with writing on both the outer sides, but in the middle of it Audrey's spacious handwriting ran uninterruptedly across both pages. There, beginning in the middle, she read:

...almost too thrilling, aeroplanes in the sky all day, uniforms everywhere, and to-day I saw 'MORTE ALLA BOLCHEVIKI' in red letters two feet high halfway along a street. And there's a *mar*vellous story about *him*. It seems the King went to see him when he was ill in hospital, and when he came to *his* bed he said, 'I hope you'll soon be out and about again.' And *he* said, 'I hope I shall, sir, because I've a lot of work to do.' Isn't it too haunting?... Tell Hal if you see him that the Mounseys are here. And by the way, I thought they were going to make me open everything at the frontier in the middle of the night, but it passed off and I breathed again. I think it was those pyjamas you ——

And at the end of the letter, to which she turned, were the words:

P.S. — It is suddenly grilling hot here.

Bettine stood for a moment as a stag stands when he sniffs the wind. She picked up the envelope that had fallen to the floor. Back and front she examined it minutely. Nothing. Then she looked at the postscript again. The next moment she had flown to the kitchen.

The chafing-dish stood on the shelf; she reached it down and set it on the table. She had filled its lamp with methylated spirits only yesterday; as she struck a match and lighted it, it was as if she kindled a blue flame in her own eyes also. Then she prepared to cook.

No, not a thin rasher of bacon or an omelette of chopped ham, but the letter. As it was, it was too big for the dish; she tore it into halves down the folding and reached for two forks from the knife-basket. She placed one half of the letter in the heated dish, pressing it down, holding her breath. Brown spots and markings began to appear in the middle. She turned to one corner. Methodically, line by line, she toasted it, moving it continually as one moves a slice of bread on a toasting-fork. She turned it over. Yes, the interlineations occupied both sides, and therefore of the other half of the letter also.

She had made exactly half her omelette when the bell rang.

She stamped her foot petulantly. Of course! The bell *would* ring just at that moment! She threw the now densely marked sheet onto the knife-box. With her face still flushed from bending over the flame, she hurried to the door. It was Hal and his Morris.

She thought quickly. It was true that the letter would keep till he had gone. If the writing had disappeared, she could heat it up again. But he had better be taught a lesson about turning up unexpectedly like this. He was very nice, but she couldn't have him popping in and out without a word of warning. So she did not put up her face as she admitted him and closed the door again. She led the way to the studio.

But she heard his voice behind her as he passed the open kitchen door.

'Just a minute, dearest — you've left the doings on,' he was saying. 'Unless you're cooking something that is — I can give you a hand — I'm rather good ——'

Damn it! She hadn't put out the spirit-lamp. And there both halves of the letter were, the plain half, the other half. She was in the kitchen almost before he was. She made a swift snatch and brushed out past him to her bedroom.

He stood without moving, looking after her. He stood so for nearly a minute. Then slowly his fingers found the extinguisher-trigger and put out the lamp. He walked into the studio. She was not there.

His first instinctive thought had been the schoolboy's thought: Which of them was it? Milk? Salts of lemon? Copper and hydrochloric acid? For, of course, every boys' paper gave the recipes. But that thought vanished as it came. He had had a gay little greeting all ready for her. He had been having lunch fifty miles away (he had been going to tell her, with as many amusing details about the lunch and the company as he could remember or invent), and all at once she had 'wirelessed' him, and here he was. But his poor little jest lay dead. Her impetuous snatch at that letter had killed it. He had better face the facts. She let him kiss her, but he knew next to nothing about her. He would never know any more than she chose to tell him. She was hiding some secret away in her bedroom now. He would have to have the whole thing out with her, and it had better be now.

But what was he to say? That for the future he didn't intend that she should have such secrets? At the thought of what her retort might be, all the courage suddenly went out of him. He would have given half a year's salary not to have seen. But a blind man could have seen. For the moment she had lost her head. He looked round the studio, and his eyes fell on a night-club-looking mascot that sprawled across the stove. Coming at that moment, it seemed to grin at him out of that unknown background of her life. He struggled with a horrible and unspecified jealousy. Yet what right had he to be jealous? Had he not taken her at her face value? He tried to tell himself that there were things in his own life that he would not think it necessary to tell her, but that was a different matter altogether. All he had wanted was that his life and hers should date from that moment when their cheeks had rested together against a cherry-tree and their lips had met. Now the first little accident that came along demonstrated that it couldn't be done.

She, too, was hurriedly thinking, standing there in her bedroom. This was the second time he had made her furious with herself. She had thrust the letter into a drawer; her face was still flushed; she unstoppered a bottle and dabbed her face with toilet-water. He ought to have seen some of the things they did to letters! He ought to have seen his own cousin — though it had been as much a lark as anything else — got up in an ancient pelisse, with broken boots and a man's cloth cap on her head, holding out a begging hand to her own friends to see if they would recognise her! He ought to have seen that young man — she remembered who had given her the nigger mascot now — spruce and clean-shaven in the morning, and transformed in the evening into a liveried chauffeur with a neat little black moustache! She wondered whether it had ever occurred to him that somewhere there might be a *dossier* with *his* name on it. But she must be careful, because of B.-J. B.-J. was his friend, had been at Eton with him, and wanted certain things done. There, her cheeks were cooler. His eyes could hardly have caught a word of the letter. She passed a comb through the brown hair and examined herself critically. She thought she could carry matters off. Over the bed-rail there hung a frock, a sleeveless thing of silver, flat and heavy as a purse of steel beads. The frock would help. She put it over her arm and walked into the studio, humming to herself a little air as she did so.

Something in him was afraid of her, as something in every man is afraid of a woman who can snatch angrily at a letter one minute and hum a soft little tune the next. She passed to the window and stood with her back to him, apparently looking over the silver frock for faults. In the light of the window it resembled an exquisitely wrought piece of armourer's work, a soft sleeveless shirt of close-wove mail. And suddenly she turned, holding it up to her neck, whence it fell in a gleaming shower to her knees.

'What do you think of it?' she asked in ordinary tones.

What could he do if she chose to act like that? He mumbled something about never knowing what a frock was like till he saw it on.

'I'm wearing it to-morrow night,' she told him. 'I might have been wearing it to-night, so you see how lucky you are, coming up like this without letting me know.'

He did not speak.

'It would be a long way to come if I didn't happen to be in,' she went on. 'Where were you to-day?'

'Watlington. Thame. I had lunch at the Spread Eagle.'

'I hope you won't neglect your job because of me. because that's the last thing you must do.'

'No, I can generally arrange it.'

And she hadn't even kissed him yet.

Moving the half-dressed doll, she placed herself in the sofa corner and draped the heavy silver over her knees. There were hooks, snap-fastenings or what-not to overhaul. She looked as if it had hailed silver over her, and on her finger was a silver thimble. He sat down by her side.

'Who are you going out with to-morrow?' he asked gloomily.

'Papa. It's mostly Papa at present. He's sent me the frock. But I forgot, you don't know him.'

'I've seen him.'

She began to chat almost more freely than he had yet heard her, all about Papa.

'He's dreadfully hard up again, eating railway-station sandwiches or buns out of a bag or something. He says he eats because he's hungry to-day and not hungry yesterday or to-morrow. Then he'll go to some large house or other and punish the sideboard.'

'Then how does he manage to send you frocks?'

'Oh, they have to go back,' she replied readily. 'Generally the next day, but they told me this one needed a little seeing to. I prefer it that way. It means I always have something different.'

He wondered whether the twilight-blue evening wrap had gone back the next day, and where this property-room or actress's wardrobe was that clothed her sumptuously for an evening and then put her back into her Cinderella greys again.

'Where is he taking you?'

'Somewhere in Eaton Place, I believe. I don't always know till I get there. Sometimes I don't know at all.' She looked up with a momentary smile. 'I don't think you believe I really work quite hard,' she said.

'But you don't go to parties in Eaton Place to translate.'

'Of course not. Often I do it afterwards.'

'Work after the party?'

'Sometimes.'

'What time do you get to bed?'

'That's what makes it so convenient being here,' she answered. 'I used to hate letting myself in at those other places at half-past three in the morning.' And she gave the hail of silver a hitch and turned to another part of it.

His jaw was set. Only a little time before he had been telling himself that he knew nothing about her; now she was telling him rather more than he liked. She was telling him that she went to parties without knowing where they were. They lent her clothes to go in that had to be sent back the next day. After the party was over, her work began, and at this time of the year day might be breaking before she put her head on her pillow. She had done it in Camden Town, and in the place before that, and the place before that. He couldn't stand it any longer. He threw himself on his knees before the shower of silver. He clasped her, silver and all.

'Oh, darling, darling! You know how I love you. Won't you chuck the whole wretched business?

Won't you? You shall never be sorry — in six months you'll have forgotten all about it and be so happy — do ——'

'But how can I chuck it when it's my job?' she said, a little surprised.

'There's heaps of other translation to be had. My uncle knows foreign houses. If it's Russian you want, we used to keep a Russian correspondence-clerk ourselves, but that's all off, I'm afraid. There isn't the least reason why you should have a job at all. I can manage.'

Her eyes seemed far away. 'Fancy me without a job,' she said as if to herself.

'Don't rub it in, darling. I know you've had a rotten time.'

'Still, I rather like the parties,' she mused.

'I think I hate those worst of all. Chuck them all and marry me and let's go off somewhere. That other's a damnable business, anyway.'

'I don't think I ought to let you talk like that,' she said slowly.

'Why oughtn't you?' he asked angrily. 'Because I call it a damnable business? It *is* a damnable business. Why should you ask people what you're to say and not to say?'

'Of course, in here it doesn't matter,' she admitted.

'Why should it matter anywhere? Good God, why shouldn't people say what they think?'

'I shouldn't if I were you,' she said, and her eyes were on his face.

'Why not?'

'Not as long as that boy's in your place,' she replied.

It was the first time she had mentioned the boy.

Of course, he had taken it for granted she knew. If B.-J. hadn't told her, Audrey would have done so, and what, after all, did he care what happened to the brat? He was ready to sacrifice the whole lot of them to get Bettine out of it.

'If you think I took him in because of B.-J. and his crew, I can assure you I didn't,' he retorted. 'I took him in entirely on my own account, and I'm going to have him out on my own account. I've had enough of it. I don't want to talk about it or think about it. It's you I want.'

'I know you do. That's why I'm telling you things,' she answered, with a serious air.

'What things?'

'The things I *am* telling you, of course. One or two of the things I have to do. I don't want you to say that you didn't know.'

'If you mean that letter I saw you with ——' he began, but she interrupted him.

'By the way, there was a message for you in it. I was to tell you the Mounseys were in Rome.'

'It's not that. I don't mean what's in it. It's your getting that sort of letter at all.'

'I should have thought you'd guessed by this time that messages sometimes have to be sent in odd ways,' she said a little coldly.

'Then let somebody else get them. I've a good mind to write to Audrey about it.'

'Talking very much about what letters people get seems to me the next thing to reading them,' she said, taking up her work again.

'Dearest! As if I should dream ——'

'You come up here when you aren't expected. You start scolding me about my letters and say you're going to write to Audrey. You're going to do no such thing. Even if I were to tell you what was in it ——'

'I'm not asking what was in it.'

'No, but you'll go imagining all sorts of things that aren't true. You might know she can't write to B.-J. direct, and if you mean that ink, do you suppose that the very idea of invisible ink doesn't thrill her to the roots of her hair?'

'That isn't the point. The point is ——'

'Oh, you are stupid!' she cried, with sudden energy. 'You get a bee in your bonnet that *everything's* part of the same thing. Suppose it isn't, but just something quite private and personal she wants to say to him? You know how he feels about her. Or don't you?'

Halsey considered it. Yes, he did know how the Goblin felt about Audrey. He was ready to believe, too, that the Goblin, his affections apart, knew enough about Audrey not to entrust anything of very great other importance to her hands. But the rest was not very clear. Even he could see that the Goblin could just as well have sent Audrey a sealed letter under cover to Bettine — unless Bettine's letters, too, were opened and read and then sent on. The use of Bettine as an intermediary ought properly to have involved the use of *two* codes, one to warn Bettine that there was something to pass on, the other the chemical or whatever it was of which B.-J. only would possess the reagent. But she, not he, had been heating that letter in the chafing-dish. Her eyes would read his intimate things before his own did. It mattered less that he would equally read Bettine's letter, since Audrey would doubtless frame it accordingly. In a word, it almost looked as if the whispered message had nothing to do with B.-J. at all, but was merely something between Audrey and Bettine themselves.

'I suppose you made it all up between you before she started?' he said.

'We made it up before she started.'

'Sort of damned silly arrangement she would make,' he grunted.

'We both made the damned silly arrangement,' she retorted, once more bending over her work.

Then he gave a desperate little laugh. After all, there might be a dozen perfectly good explanations he knew nothing about. Damn the letter; he hadn't come up from Thame to watch her sew and bully her about her letters. He was sitting by her side again, watching the silver thimble busy with the silver frock. The frock was draped over her foot, and he wondered whether her foot could possibly be lovelier than her hands. His own hand rested on her shoulder, but she did not cease her work. He realised that they had been on the verge of a quarrel. There they were, alone together in a studio, and the quarrel over provided he said no more about letters.

'Put it down for a few minutes, darling.'

'I've nearly finished.'

'Wear it to-night and let's go somewhere.'

'Where?'

'Dinner and a show somewhere. I'll put the car away and we can take a taxi.'

'Were you thinking of changing?'

'I can, and then come back for you. Put it down for a few minutes.'

'This is the last one ——'

She finished the last fastening and took off the thimble.

A minute or two later and the letter might not have existed for him.

'There,' she said at last, arranging her hair. 'What's the time now?'

'Five o'clock.'

'Will you fetch me at half-past six?'

'Yes.'

'Then you run along and change.'

'Just five minutes — it doesn't take me long to dress ——'

The five minutes passed, and she made him go. Parkinsons' might see the Morris in the yard and wonder what he was doing in town, but he had done pretty well for them that week, and the week before that hadn't been a bad one either. If he hadn't been in London, he would only have been playing billiards or yawning in a cinema or thinking about his next day's work in some coffee-room or other. He stopped at a theatre box-office and bought a couple of stalls. He put away the car in Parkinsons' yard. Then he walked to Bedford Row.

As he opened the door of his flat, he heard sounds in the sitting-room. He pushed, opened, stood for a moment watching the scene before him, and then broke into a loud laugh.

Oh, excellent! If Master Moss was well enough for that, he was well enough to be sent about his business.

In the middle of the room stood the blond pugilist, stripped to the waist. He had evidently been performing feats of strength. He stood where Halsey had once made Clarry stand, and one of his arms was stiffly outstretched. On the couch lay the soiled turban of Clarry's convalescence, with another knotted wisp beside it, which was Clarry's arm-sling. Clarry himself, likewise half-stripped, pyjama-legs rolled up as if he was swabbing a deck, was making preliminary passes with Halsey's length of rope.

'It's from B.C. this trick is,' he was vaunting. 'They can fetch a man off of his horse at forty paces. Keep still, I might miss it first time ——'

He did miss it. Blanchard, whose back was turned, continued to stand like a statue.

'Hard luck,' said Halsey, stepping forward. 'Have another go.'

The end of the rope fell from Clarry's hand. Crestfallen, he looked at Hal.

'Hallo, guv'nor,' he said. 'I — I was just exercising it a bit so it wouldn't get stiff.'

'Capital. Don't mind me. I'm just going,' Hal smiled.

'I didn't touch nothing else in the drawer, only the rope — straight I didn't, boss ——'

'Well, I'm afraid I can't stop,' said Hal, laughing again. 'I only came in to change. Carry on ——'

He moved to his bedroom as the half-stripped welterweight reached for his shirt again.

Admirable! To-night he would give his lodger notice for next Saturday midday. He looked at his watch. Twenty to six. Twenty minutes to dress and half an hour to get back to the studio. He threw off his coat and filled the basin. The young rascal! But, at any rate, life was looking up again.

At half-past six exactly he was once more ringing Audrey's bell. He had to wait several minutes, and when the door did open, it did so only sufficiently for her to see who it was. The inch became a foot, he slipped in, and she closed the door immediately again.

She had not even had time to put on her bedroom slippers. A thin blue figured dressing-gown and nothing whatever else clipped her close as the folds of a tanagra. He smelt bath-salts and moisture and warmth. From the partly open door of the bathroom came a mist of steam. He saw that her feet were as lovely as her hands.

'No, Hal — I shall catch cold ——' she murmured in his arms.

'Cold!' He laughed softly.

'There's a draught through the letter-box ——'

'Kiss me ——'

'There. Now let me go.'

The strangling noise of the emptying bath was heard.

'I shall really be angry, if you don't let me go, Hal ——'

'Kiss me ——'

'No — we're going out ——'

With a strength he hadn't thought she possessed, she tore herself away, and the bedroom door closed on the pink heels. He walked into the studio to wait.

That moist warmth and fragrance was still about him. He was brightly conscious of her beyond the wall, slipping this over her head, stepping into that. Her personality suddenly pervaded the whole place, so that he could hardly believe it had ever been Audrey's. Only a little time before he had been angry with his cousin. She was the older woman and therefore responsible for Bettine. But as his eyes rested on the refectory table, he remembered Bettine's slighting little glance at the new paint-tubes. He heard her that afternoon again, saying, 'Wouldn't the very idea of invisible ink thrill her to the roots of her hair?'

Bettine dominated, not Audrey. She dominated Hal, too. He suspected that she had successfully got away with something about that letter, and he didn't care. She might even have timed her bath so as to subdue him utterly; well, what did he want but to be utterly subdued? Oughtn't that mouth to be a thousand times more to him that it was not the mouth of a fool? He sat down. It was almost too much to have had his arms about her like that. O God, their marriage!

Bettine Frühling — Betty Spring ——

She came in. She had put on the sleeveless frock, and there seemed to be cool silver in her eyes, too. 'What do you think of my shoulders and arms?' they seemed to be asking him. He had not known they were like that, even in holding her in the blue figured dressing-gown.

'Do me up behind,' she said, and turned. He dropped to his knees to do so, and kissed it before putting it to bed under its silver coverlet. The back made a little answering pressure against his lips.

'And now we really must go out,' she said. 'We'd better walk till we meet a taxi.'

She threw a cloak of Audrey's over the hired silver. Her head was bare. She gave him her key, as she had no pocket. It seemed to confer some intoxicating freedom on him.

The little love-delays had taken time, and they wouldn't have to be very long over dinner. The taxi set them down at a restaurant within a stone's throw of the theatre. It pleased him that she ate hungrily, and he thought of this Papa who ate buns and sandwiches and then punished the supper-buffets of large houses. It was his turn to take Bettine out to-morrow night. But Halsey didn't want to think about to-morrow night. He gave her still more food. She seemed to know people by sight if not to speak to, for she was able to point out to him three or four women at the other tables, a gossip journalist, a film actress, the proprietress of a block of West-End flats, a woman who ran a night-club. He suddenly realised what a lot he had been in the country. He would keep her busy picking the hayseeds out of his hair. He told her so, and she looked grave.

'You won't have to neglect your job because of me,' she said again. 'And you really must let me know whenever you're coming up.'

'For fear I catch you doing something you oughtn't to be doing?' he laughed.

She looked for some moments across the restaurant. Then, 'Yes,' she said.

A little later he called for his bill.

At the theatre there had been some little hitch about their stalls. Other people occupied them, and there was some little coming and going of attendant girls and a scrutiny of tickets. But again it pleased him to show her that when he reserved a seat for her, that seat was hers, and that intruders could be got rid of quite smilingly and pleasantly. The seats were in the middle of the third row. The show was a mixed one, with ballet interludes, and already the orchestra was playing Moszkowski. Their heads were close together over the programme, identifying the piece, and she asked him whether he played.

'No. That is, just a note or two on the flute sometimes,' he replied.

It seemed strange that their lips should have joined, that he should have held her moist and yielding in his arms, and that all the little habitual things about one another were still to learn. But if she was fond of music, too, that would be topping. There would be the Queen's Hall, the other halls, Sunday afternoons at the Alhambra. He looked forward to countless evenings ahead when he would be giving her dinner and taking her on to a show. What was this thing the band was playing? Under the cover of Audrey's wrap, which she had drawn half across her knees, his fingers played it in the palm of her hand.

And on Saturday he intended that his place should be his own again.

On the stage a red-nosed soldier-servant was making knockabout mirth, for the war memories had settled down with the humour on the top, and khaki was now something to be fetched out of a wardrobe. The bare-legged chorus had just been introduced, and dancing round the comic orderly were a dozen girls with wet-white shoulders and legs and wigs like many-hued chrysanthemums. They became grouped in an arrested pose as a staff-captain, also a girl, clicked her heels in the middle of the stage and saluted. Without moving her head, Bettine suddenly said, 'There's a girl I used to know, the fourth from the left.'

He looked. The girl looked just like the others to him, but she couldn't be just like the others if Bettine knew her.

'Do you mean you've been on the stage?' he asked her.

'No. But I've been secretary to a producer, and I know a lot of them. She used to dance in a cabaret in Brussels. Here she is on the programme, Lily Brown. She's spelt with an *i* and an *au* really.'

'She's rather pretty.'

Bettine moved the bared shoulders slightly. 'She won't be very long,' she said, and Halsey's eyes continued to follow Miss Lili Braun about, with the quickened interest in her that Bettine knew her.

During the interval they stood in a corridor, and Bettine, who did not smoke very much, smoked a cigarette. As she stood like a silver minnow against the dull red of the wall, there came up to her a young man in street clothes who spoke to her. There was no reason why Halsey should not hear all that was said; the young man, whose appearance Hal didn't think very much of, was merely asking her whether she had seen so-and-so lately, and how somebody else was, and what had become of another person. She answered him briefly, and from her tone it was evident that she didn't think much of him either. When he had gone, Hal asked who he was.

'He's the reason Lili Braun won't be pretty much longer,' she told him. 'He does nothing, and spends every shilling she's fool enough to let him have. Why? Did you want me to introduce him?'

'No.'

'Then let's go back. I rather want to see the next.'

They returned to their places, and the lights of the auditorium were lowered again.

But, for whatever reason, a change had come over her. It showed in her hands, which were restlessly folding her programme into a narrow strip and unfolding it again, and she had seated herself differently in her stall. Reluctantly Hal agreed that perhaps it was better that way, and again his eyes singled out Miss Lili Braun from the mass that kicked in unison, identically danced, backward-bent, laughed its simultaneous staccato 'Ha, ha, ha.' Odd the difference even knowing her real name made. She was not now a spoke in that living gyrating wheel, not a link in that human festoon, but suddenly an ordinary young girl, of Bettine's own age, very much of Bettine's colouring, who did her job, performed her professional exercises on a bar against a wall, turned herself in her practice skirt before a mirror, painted the natural hue of her limbs with wet-white, carried a bag and a short umbrella in the street, read a book in the Tube. She had a history, and part at least of it was Bettine's history, too. Bettine knew all about the loafing husband or lover or whatever he was on whose account Lili would not keep her good looks much longer; and suddenly Hal's eyes left the stage. He wondered who the people were that Bettine and the young man had been talking about. He wondered who the producer in Brussels had been. Looking back, it struck him all at once that she had told him an astonishing lot about herself to-day; more, twenty times more, than she had ever told him before. He wished he hadn't brought her here. It was now she who was thoughtfully watching Miss Lili Braun, telling over her memories, no doubt, of contracts and cabarets and shows and young men who made girls old. Bother Miss Lili Braun! It was she who was the cause of this sudden moodiness. He watched the hands that again folded the programme into a tight strip, then doubled it, then kneaded it into a hard lump. He must get her out of this. It would be better to go on and dance somewhere. It would be better still to take her back to the studio. He looked at her nape and at the silver frock he had fastened up for her. He spoke in her ear.

'You don't want to see her afterwards, do you?'

'Who?' she asked.

'Your friend on the stage.'

'No. And if you've had enough of this, I'm sure I have.'

'Let's go, then.'

She reached for the wrap over the back of the fauteuil.

Outside he asked her where she would like to go to dance.

'Let's go to Raffaeles',' she said.

'Oh, hang it — not there,' he grumbled.

'I thought you asked me where I'd like to go.'

'Yes, but surely there's somewhere more amusing than that.'

'I want to go to Raffaeles'.'

He called a taxi.

She had to sign the book before he could enter, and when they had climbed the threadbare red stairs and reached the shabby room with the tarnished Victorian gilding, she seemed to have had no particular object in coming. This time there were hardly a dozen people in the place, and half of these were gathered about an automatic racing-machine that clattered and clanged like a cash-register every time a shilling was dropped into it. She didn't want a drink, though he made her have one in the hope that it would cheer her up, and she didn't leave the room; evidently to-night she had no report to make, that at the Palladian Restaurant she had seen Volumnia the society-paragraphist dining with Miss Mae LeClerquey of the films and Mrs. Levey of Levey's Hotel, or that Miss Lili Braun had returned to her place in the chorus at the Palladian Theatre. She seemed to have come as a cat is to be found about the premises the family has left. She asked the waiter who brought the drinks whether there was any news of Lucca, who had accompanied Audrey to Italy. There was none, the waiter replied; but the Signorina Fullalove, had Mees Bettine heard from her? he asked. 'She's still in Rome,' Bettine told him sulkily, and Halsey grew moody, too. The talk about Audrey had reminded him of the afternoon's letter again.

'Let's finish our drinks and get back to the studio,' he pleaded.

'That reminds me,' she said. 'You have my key. Perhaps you'd better give it to me.'

'Darling! What's happened?'

'How, happened?'

'What's made you come over all dumpy like this?'

'I don't know that I am all dumpy, and if I were I shouldn't want to talk about it.'

'Let's get back to the studio.'

'Oh!' She jumped up. 'Give me a couple of shillings for that thing!'

He gave her two shillings. She crossed to the gambling-machine, and a pale young man with red hair stood aside while she dropped the coins in. 'Ting! Ting!' Merely two shillings gone west. She made an impatient gesture and returned to where he was sitting. She swept up her things.

'For God's sake, let's get out of this,' she said.

He was only too glad.

But matters were no better in the taxi. She sat with Audrey's cloak drawn hermetically about her, looking out of the window at the lights that passed. He made another attempt.

'I say, I've an idea,' he said. 'What about your coming with me on my comic milk-round to-morrow?'

'I'm going out to-morrow night. I told you.'

'I could get you back in plenty of time.'

She shook herself and did not reply. The only thing to do was to leave her alone. He took a cigarette from his case. Then by the light of the match he struck he saw that her lashes were wet. He threw down match and cigarette and tried to take her hands.

'Darling! There *is* something!' he said miserably. 'Do tell me!'

Again she shook herself.

'Have I done anything?'

'No... Oh, I'm only upsetting you!'

'You upset me horribly when you're like this. Do tell me what's the matter.'

'The matter is I think we'd better cut it all right out. Now. It's no good both of us being unhappy.'

'Cut it out! What do you mean?' he asked, in dismay.

'Cut out seeing me at all. I've done my best. I could have written your name in the book without taking you in for that matter; nobody'd have known. It all began by my making a fool of myself that afternoon by that silly tree.'

'Bettine!'

'Don't you see? Don't you see I've been trying to show you half the afternoon and all the evening? I've been trying to be decent to you. You've got quite the wrong idea of me. I don't *want* you to have the wrong idea about me, and I'm sorry about the other.'

'What other, Betty?'

'When you came back to fetch me and I — wasn't quite ready. You'd better forget that. No, there isn't anybody else, if that's what you mean. Where are we?'

'South Kensington.'

'Then stop him and give me my key. You go home by Tube. Stop.' She knocked at the window, and the taxi stopped.

They were opposite the station arcade, and she was waiting for him to give her her key. He was dumb with the abruptness of it.

'You get your Tube. Yes, I'll take the taxi on if you like, but it isn't three minutes. No, I'm not meeting anybody. I shall go straight to bed.'

'But ——'

'You oughtn't to have come up to town like this. I can't be dropped on by people just when they think they will. If I can't have the studio without that ——'

The loveliness of that hour before dinner — and now this! Not even a kiss at the door, not a word about seeing him again! And she admitted that he himself had done nothing. *Was* it suddenly seeing Lili Braun again? What was that about his name in a book? Was she going with that man to Raffaeles' again to-morrow night? Or did it all come back to the studio, his unannounced visit, and the letter he had caught her heating? The letter that she said contained B.-J.'s inmost thoughts about Audrey? Did she want to get back to it, to read it again, to concoct her reply?

He didn't know. She had got back into the taxi. She gave the address. It moved away, turned the corner and disappeared.

And if it was the letter, it was not the only one that brought him little luck that day. He found the other waiting for him on the mantelpiece in Bedford Row. He read it, standing under Audrey's yellow shade with the black cats on it. It ran as follows:

DEAR VIBART, —

I am afraid the enclosed will speak for themselves. Of course the whole arrangement was irregular, but it suited both of us, and I can't imagine how they got on the track of it. Anyway, I've had a talk with them, and I gather there won't be any consequences as long as I undertake to have you out in say a week's time. You will see I have credited you with the remaining weeks of the quarter. I shan't be able to see you before you leave, as I'm off myself this afternoon for a week. You might drop the letters, etc., into my letter-box. Yours

C. H. OWEN

P.S. — Have *you* any idea of how they got wind of it?

The enclosures were three, one from the Borough Rating Authorities, one from the Sanitary Inspector's Office, and the third his own bill for rent to date. He knew nothing whatever about Rateable Values and the Inhabited House Duty. In his view the other matters, those on the little half-landing the sanitation people's letter referred to, were sufficient for the Commissioner for Oaths and himself, if perhaps a little inadequate if to the names of H. Vibart and C. H. Owen those of C. Moss, (?) Blanchard, and quite a number of casual visitors were added. At any rate, it needed no chafing-dish to bring out what the letters meant. They meant that he had to clear out of his rooms, and that he had a week to do it in.

CHAPTER V

I

ON ENTERING into residence at a Borstal Institution candidates are received by the doctor, the chaplain, and the governor, and are given a suit of plain grey. Meritorious conduct brings promotion to a uniform of blue, a mirror, a strip of carpet for the bedside, and the privilege of tacking photographs to the cubicle walls. The day begins at 5.30 A.M., and ends at 8.30 P.M., and the elements of a trade are taught.

But Clarry had never got his blue. When they had spoken to him about a trade, he had hesitated between house-painting and plumbing; both these crafts attracted him because of the access they afforded to other people's premises, and the plumbing perhaps pulling a little more the strongly of the two because of the freezing-point of water and the bursting of pipes in the winter. He was holding forth to Halsey on plumbing that Saturday morning. His head was unbandaged and brightly brilliantined, and he had the use of both his hands once more.

'A new cistern ball was all it wanted, and brazing round the *S*,' he pronounced loudly from the basket-chair. He resented the eviction bitterly. 'They make a fuss about nothing to keep their own jobs going, that's what these Inspectors does. Nobody need ha' wanted a better thunder-box. I made Blanchard scrub it out as clean as a new pin before he left, and I sent Lottie out myself for a tin of that powder with holes in the lid. Anybody could ha' eaten their dinner off of it. Burocrazy's going to be the downfall of this country.'

Hal was moving restlessly about, stopping once in a while to look at some object of furniture as long and attentively as if he had never seen it before. The drawer of his writing-table stood open, and the table was spread over with the papers he had taken from it.

'And I wouldn't mind betting that Owen a bob they *can't* enter in on your premises as long as the plumbing's interior,' Clarry expounded. 'The pipes has to be taken through outside. Burocrazy, that's what they are, and the Rates and Taxes is the same, spying and nosing about. There won't be no freedom left soon.'

Hal moved to the desk and stood gazing down at the papers. He'd go through them presently. In the mean time he might as well be writing out Owen's cheque.

Clarry supposed it was because he was a toff that he took the notice to quit the way he did. Toffs weren't used to being moved about from pillar to post like that. But half a day would be enough for the moving once he'd got these papers sorted out, and he had a whole week yet. Mr. Halsey Vibart seemed to have completely forgotten that he had given Clarry his marching-orders too. It wasn't for Clarry to remind him.

Deep in the basket-chair and to all appearances doing nothing, Clarry was in reality intensely busy. This removal that cast the gloom over his guv'nor filled him with a score of hopeful new plans. Without it he would have had to go; now anything might happen. Moreover, removals meant pickings. All sorts of unwanted things came to light. And as Halsey sat at his desk writing, with his back to Clarry, there stood at his elbow a certain bundle of papers, rather dusty, with the string slipping half off it.

And let us be just to Clarry. He had *not* been poking his nose into Halsey's desk when his back was turned. He would never have touched the desk except that that piece of rope was kept there, and he had wanted to show Blanchard how they fetched a man off his horse at forty paces. But when a loosely tied packet stares you in the face, your eyes can't help catching a word or two — 'National Physical Laboratory — Report — Resonance — Bechstein.' That was the one, by his guv'nor's elbow, with the string half off it. It was about spruces.

In order to understand Clarry's interest in that particular bundle, we had better glance for a moment at another of the episodes of his variegated past, the episode of the motor-bicycle.

A friend of Clarry's had had a motor-bike to sell, and Clarry, after inspecting the machine, had asked how much.

'Five quid.'

'Caledonia Market. Stolen. A quid. Got her book?'

A registration-book to correspond with the bicycle had been produced.

'Couple o' quid,' Clarry had next offered.

'Couple o' nix.'

'Will you give me a week, and anything I get over four's mine?'

'Yuss.'

A quiet little raffle had been the idea. Twenty tickets at five bob, or forty at half-a-crown, was five pounds. Clarry knew perfectly well that the whole of his acquaintance did not muster half that number of capitalists, but say he sold six five-bob chances and got the cash. That left three pounds ten as a responsibility for the underwriters, *not* necessarily for cash. He stood to lose nothing, since at any moment he could return the five bobs and call the whole deal off on the grounds of the shyness of the investing public. The purely mathematical chances of his winning the bike himself were fourteen to six, or seven to three, or two and one third to one, with everything repudiable up to the very last moment.

And if he did win the bike, there was no reason why he should not repeat the operation, with himself not as agent next time, but as agent and vendor both.

So, while Halsey writes out Owen's cheque, picture, if you will, two Clarrys, one of them in the basket-chair with his eyes on the bundle of papers at Halsey's elbow, the other hovering as it were in past recollection, the time nightfall, the scene a villainous back alley off the Fulham Road. For a fortnight the bike has been on exhibition in a coal shed, and as Clarry's chances of the prize are two and a third to one, he ought not to be presiding at the solemn ceremony of the draw. But he is in control of it, standing under the alley's single lamp, with a small space cleared about him, and thereafter, filling the alley, ring upon ring of tense faces, with outposts to give warning of the approach of the police. A youth of acclaimed probity has the sealed envelope in his pocket, and Clarry holds the cap with the folded paper strips. Virtuously he shakes the cap; the slips of paper shall be adders or ever his finger-tips shall as much as touch them. Trusted proxies draw for him, for it might give rise to feeling were the extent of his holding to be bruited abroad. Like a dream redreamed, it all came back to Clarry, sitting there in the chair, seeing sometimes the papers at Halsey's elbow, sometimes the eager faces in the lamplight and the windows thrown up that the alley-dwellers might see what was going on.

And why should he *not* have won the gamble, fair and square and on the mathematical chances only? After paying out the original owner, why should he *not* have finished thirty shillings to the good and the motor-bike as well?

And why must it be a motor-bicycle? Why not any other commodity? Why not even a non-commodity if people fancied it enough to pay money for it? Clarry had a sort of feeling he couldn't explain about those papers of Mr. Vibart's. They might be no good to Mr. Vibart, sitting there drumming his fingers on the desk, because he was a toff, and couldn't be bothered; that sort was always letting things slip through their fingers. But things stuck to Clarry's fingers, and he had the same sort of feeling about those papers that he had had about the motor-bicycle.

Mechanically Hal began the task of sorting his papers. He glanced at documents, tore them across, and threw them behind him on the floor. A very few he set aside; why didn't half this stuff go into the fire as it came? At times he stopped entirely, to resume the gloomy thoughts that had occupied him during the last two days.

Should he write to her? No, writing was no good, he must see her. Twice yesterday he had tried to do so, but he had got no answer when he had rung at the blue door. And to-day he was lunching with Percy. He might now have to cadge on Percy for a bed on nights when he remained in town. Oxfordshire, Berks, and Bucks, then down into Essex and back again the next morning; it was a devil of a way; but there was no help for it. Life would be insupportable without at least one mid-week evening in town.

It was a wearing world; it got you down; sometimes the morning and the evening didn't seem like the same day. Where had he gone astray that she should suddenly have behaved like that — for though he had asked her whether he had done anything, and she had said no, people often answer so rather than be bothered. Again and again and again he had gone over it all. About that letter: why hadn't he risked a row and had the whole thing out to a finish with her there and then? (Rip! A handful of old receipts fell to the floor.) What common ground could there ever be between them as long as he shirked plain questions like that? She had gone out of her way so that he should not have any illusions about her way of life and the people she knew — why did he so obstinately close his eyes? ('Dear Sir, Your esteemed favour of the 18th' — damn tradesmen and their esteem!) Why had he proposed a theatre that night like a fool instead of giving her dinner somewhere near and then taking her back to the studio? Why, for that matter, must he look on her as so blasted spiritual? She was flesh and blood, wasn't she? Did those lips even pretend that they hadn't been kissed before? (A savage rip this time, and the papers halfway across the room.) Why? Why? Why? Because he was just a common-or-garden double-damned fool. Because, when he was offered a chance, he didn't take it. Because, because, because. But he'd know better next time. Skipping in her bare feet to the door all moist from her bath and nothing on but that wisp of a thing — he'd know better next time. Turning her back to be fastened up in her silver, with her arms as smooth and white at the back as they were at the front, and her little back pressing against his mouth like that — oh, he'd know better next time! (Owen's letter. 'As long as I undertake to have you out in a week's time. P.S. — Have *you* any idea of how they got wind of it?')

The next moment he felt utterly sick with himself. What had become of that first little pastoral, of the quiet red roofs and the saint's-day headdress and the Angelus ringing somewhere? What about the cherry-tree and the soft voice of his mother? Here he was, grinding his teeth, and wondering what would have happened that evening if he had cut loose and rough-housed it a bit. He wanted to crawl into a dark hole somewhere. Something decent had gone out of the order of things. The air of the world had become tainted; it was as if the battlefield smell still made its way through, and everybody breathed it alike whether they wanted to or not. Worse, Bettine herself not only breathed it; she was thrust foremost into it, like the white mice in the submarines and the canaries in the underground galleries, to gasp out a warning to the others, and then curl up and die. Why? Because she was young and lovely and drew men's eyes to her. Why must it always be the young? Where did the old come in? Oh, B.-J. had said bitterly, *they* were looking ahead. They were always looking ahead. They had been looking ahead before the war, and during the war, and now they were weighted down with the vastness of their experience and responsibility. And no doubt B.-J. was right in saying something ought to be done about the whole state of affairs, but who was going to do it? One saviour of his country, popping up in the nick of time? But they were always producing imitation saviours, with actors' faces and clay feet, discovered in a year or two to be clay halfway up the statue. Was everybody going to take a hand, then? But to have everybody at a job would mean that nobody at all knew where he was. Pale-eyed night-riders, then, and people who got into other people's houses without keys? Lads who dashed to Birmingham and got their heads broken? Senders of anonymous letters? People who got a man turned out of his flat by means of the Sanitary Authorities and the Assessment Office? R.C. doctors who sympathised, but must stop at that? Tamperers with the steering of cars? Or who? Halsey didn't know. It wasn't his business. But it was his business when something came between him and his love.... (An old war notebook; should he or should he not keep that? Better keep it, perhaps; it had been a pretty grim time, but at least it hadn't pretended to be anything else; he set the book aside) ... The war? That was the atmosphere she had grown up in. He remembered leave and the licence of leave. Younger than he, she had not even his childhood; it was out of his own childhood that he had invented that about the saint's-day headdress and the Angelus ... (A note from Audrey asking him to tea to meet some pretty girl or other; nothing between the lines of it) ... Why had he never seen her with Audrey before? Why had Audrey never asked him to the studio to meet her? How long had they known one another? Why did she sometimes speak slightingly of Audrey and Audrey pretend to treat her as if she was a child? But it was no good asking himself these questions. He would have another shot at seeing her this afternoon when he had finished with Percy ... (What was this bundle of stuff at his elbow tied up with string? He opened it. Ah, that! Vibart, Sons & Co. and all the old correspondence with the piano people.

The estimates, the National Physical Laboratory's reports, all the bright hopes, doubts, delays, the hopes renewed, till finally had come the N.G. and the forgetting. How quickly once important things shrank to nothing! There in B.C. the stuff undoubtedly was, soundboard spruce second to none. Perhaps one day somebody would start a factory on the spot, or some new means of transport might be discovered. Halsey would be dead and off the map by then. Those papers were as dead as mutton already. Let them go.)

He did not see how dancingly Clarry's eyes watched the bundle as he tossed it behind him.

But he seemed to remember the lad's presence. He faced round in his chair.

'By the way, what about you?' he asked. 'I'd forgotten about you. What are your plans?'

'I haven't got none yet, guv'nor.'

'We seem to be in the cart together.'

'Shall you be wanting another place in London, guv'nor?'

'I shall have to have somewhere. Yes, it'll have to be in London.'

'What about me having a look round for you? I ain't got nothing very particular on just now.'

'Not a bad idea,' said Halsey.

'For instance, there's removing,' Clarry enlarged. 'Big pantechnicon places like you'd go to charges you something cruel for that, but I could get somebody'd do it after his work for a bob or two.'

'So could I,' Hal remarked. 'Parkinsons' men would do it for me.'

'They wouldn't do your painting for you if there was any painting to be done,' Clarry urged. 'I nearly took up house-painting once. There's lots of ways I could save you quids, boss.'

'Well, we'll see. As it's only a few days, I suppose we may as well fiddle the tune out.' He looked at his watch. 'By jove, time I was getting along. Yes, if you do happen to hear of a place something like this ——'

'Do you want all them papers cleared away?'

'Yes. Shove them in the bucket and put them out on the landing. I don't know what time I shall be in.'

Clarry had the coveted papers in his pocket before the door had closed on Halsey's back.

It was as he turned into Holborn that Halsey Vibart came upon the Procession.

Nobody needed reminding yet of what processions of men looked like; but were these men, crawling along Holborn as if something had welled up from the broken sewers beneath? C–Threes? The bottom fell out of the alphabet without reaching their horrible minus. It had hardly strength enough to bear aloft the Hammers and Sickles of its own banners. Because it could sink no deeper into misery, it scowled and jeered and made faces at those it passed. Unnourished, crooked-spined, malevolent-eyed, and with mouths that threatened — who had had the dreadful idea to parade them in the light of day like this? That earnest, furrowed man who marched at their head? This was no Pool of Bethesda. He could not heal. He could only tear away the rags and let civilisation see her sores. Mounted police shepherded them along, and here and there a young man with a green badge in his buttonhole watched stonily. Their thin cracked voices sang. They sang that together they would do or die to keep the Red Flag floating high. Hal felt as if he hadn't had any breakfast. There passed him a woman with rusty red hair falling about her neck and a phantom of a child in her arms; so they bred, these; the woman bared her gums as she thrust out the child towards Hal, and somebody laughed. A bearded, goitred man in a bath-chair followed her, pushed by two youths who scattered leaflets. Still another shook his fist at the skies. The red of their handkerchiefs and rosettes made a poppy-field of Holborn.

Then it passed. Holborn became normal again. Hal turned his face towards the First Avenue Hotel.

His first thought was that Percy looked years older. That admirable dentistry of his showed up altogether too suddenly, and as Hal came upon him, he was talking to himself. They sat down at the same table they had occupied on the day when Percy had asked him what he had been up to in Russia and had showed him the anonymous letter. The first thing Hal did was to order beer. He wanted to get the taste of that beastly Procession out of his mouth.

'I suppose you've seen it in the papers?' Percy said, without preface. 'I mean about our Meeting. Next Wednesday I face the music. Golf? No golf for me to-day. I have to be at the Docks by four. Yes, a boat's due in, and there are one or two little things I want to see for myself.'

'I'm devilish sorry, old man,' Hal muttered.

'See that mob outside just now?' Percy went on. 'Enough to give you the crawls. Do you know, Hal, I'm hanged if I know what I am nowadays. I used to be a Tory, but I'm not sure now that the Tories aren't making more Bolshies than all the rest put together.'

'I wish I could help you,' said Hal.

Gone was the humour with which Percy had talked about bee-keeping and the quiet life. Hal also noticed that he told the waiter to leave the port on the table.

'And I'm hanged if I see the difference between a Tory Government that's got to pass Socialist measures or file its petition and a Socialist one that does everything the Tories do. Sure you'd rather have beer than port? That was a very good port your father used to drink, but you young 'uns all smoke cigarettes nowadays. Where's Audrey now?'

'In Italy.'

'Italy? Well, there seems to be a fellow there who knows his own mind. If he doesn't know anything else. I've just been thinking how queer it would be to come back in another twenty years and have a look at things. Not that London doesn't seem to change every day as far as that goes, and as for meeting anybody you know, anybody you want to see, that is — did you say you saw that Procession?'

'Tell me about the Meeting next Wednesday.'

'Oh, sufficient unto the day — how does it go on? — is the evil thereof. That reminds me, I've something to show you. Do you remember this? I was having a rummage round this morning and found it among a lot of old things.'

He took it from his pocket-book. It was an old flashlight group, of amateur theatricals. Halsey's father and mother were there, and Percy, and Victor Fullalove, and Hal and Audrey, eight and seven years old. They were dressed up in shawls and scarves and silver-paper crowns and tinsel trimmings, so that there was little but its faded brownness to date the photograph. But for all that it all seemed very, very remote.

'Have it if you like,' Percy said. 'I found it this morning among a lot of old stuff. Nowadays you ring up a restaurant for your party and the management provides the crackers. Heard from Audrey? Victor won't be dead as long as Audrey's alive; never knew two so much alike. Stick it in your pocket. Or in the fire. No times last for ever, though I'm hanged if we don't carry on as if they did. How long will it take you to get from here to Fenchurch Street? I have to be at Tilbury by four. Heaps of time. Got your car anywhere handy?'

Halsey was certainly not going to worry Percy with his own troubles, at any rate to-day. Percy insisted that his creditors should pay for the lunch, and after it they walked along Holborn to Parkinsons' yard. But they were not yet rid of the Procession. Between Holborn and Leadenhall Market several other detachments passed them, with red rosettes and Hammers and Sickles on their banners; there was evidently a field-day in the Park. Percy appeared to be thinking of his business at the Docks and of the Meeting next Wednesday. Round the narrow corner by the market they swung, and at the station arches Percy got out.

'Well, so long,' he said. 'Thanks for the lift, and give my love to Audrey when you write. Look out for next Wednesday's evening papers. 'Bye, old boy ——'

Hal watched his legs out of sight, mounting the stairs to the upper platform.

II

The sunshine of the May afternoon was warm on the little Embankment garden, and the creeping flecks of light and leaf-shadow came and went as softly as thoughts over Carlyle's stony face. Say they were his day-dreams as he sat there, his hands tightly folded, his eyes looking away to the south; he had plenty to dream about. Fourscore and six his years on earth had been, nearly a third of them contemporaneous with that Georgius Tertius whose cracked statue watches over Windsor Great Park. And he had lived to see Charing Cross Station lighted with electric light.

But his four mammoth neighbours of Lot's Road, those corner-stones of some gigantesque vague temple still to be, had grown up in the darkness since those retinas had turned to stone.

Yet say that he dreamed as he sat there in his dressing-gown, under the trees, the memories coming and going as lightly as the shadows of the leaves. He sat with his back to Hyde Park, his face turned towards Kennington Common. And the year was 1848, and the date, as the stone Carlyle remembered, April the 10th. Abroad were revolutions, with only the Czar of All the Russias likely to keep his crown, and over the entrance of Mivart's Hotel, London, a wag had suggested that a board should be placed: 'Distressed and Fugitive Monarchs taken in here.' And a petition had been drawn up for presentation to Parliament, which some said contained six million signatures, and to Kennington Common thousands and scores of thousands of men were to march.

And in order that they should not march there, or at any rate should march no farther, steps had been taken. Unseen, unheard, troops had been packed into the Bank of England and the Mint. Into Knightsbridge and Trafalgar Square reënforcements were poured, and firearms and cutlasses from the Tower were sent to the Customs House, the Mansion House, Somerset House, the Admiralty, and Pall Mall. The Specials were sworn in, among them Prince Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, who, if Carlyle remembered rightly, was then living in King Street, Saint James's. Sacking and pillage, men said, was to be the order of the day.

And Carlyle recalled how the six million signatures were drawn by four strong cart-horses, and the second car, the one that held the delegates, was twenty feet long. Eight banners were fixed to it, with 'The Charter' and 'No Vote No Muskets' and 'Universal Suffrage' written on them, and other mottoes that proclaimed that the voice of the people was the voice of God. Along Goodge Street and into Tottenham Court Road, Carlyle saw them pass, and along Holborn and down New Bridge Street and across Blackfriars Bridge. There the civil force first appeared, the City and the 'L' Division of the Metropolitan Police. Opposite Stamford Street the police became mounted. And so on to Kennington Common, where other detachments already awaited them. Carlyle not only remembered it all, and what had happened since, right up to the time when they put electric light into Charing Cross Station. He also remembered what had gone before.

For if you had called that twenty-foot cart a Leyland lorry, he would not have known what you meant, but he knew what machinery did, and had heard Manchester wake at half-past five of a Monday morning, with its ten thousand times ten thousand spools and spindles humming like an Atlantic tide. Hammers and Sickles might have been strange to him, but not Chartist torchlight meetings nor Birmingham riots, nor what went on at Cradley Heath. He knew all about incendiary tinder-boxes and vitriol-throwing — yes, and about Numbers, too, for from that dark room in the Glasgow Gallowgate had not the dread '60' settled the market-price of assassination and blood, paying over the cash with his own hands? That enormous event just over in France might be celluloid now, with grease-painted mummers strutting under the Jupiter lamps and history filtered down through a magic-lantern, but to him it had been a glaring and hieroglyphic picture-writing across the sky for all men to read, and all the horror and terror of it wasted if the lesson was not learned. Reach down his book and read. The thing, his book says, has a new name, but has had many names, and will have many more. It will go on having them as long as those in high places, appointed to sow the land with corn, sow it with chaff instead. Read again. There is no linear history, says his book, with this selected event related to that in a consecutive chain of cause-and-effect. Every event is inextricably bound up with all the rest, the whole one living, infinitely deep moment, with simultaneous happenings impossible simultaneously to be set down, so that it comes about that, all in a given hour, a youth in Bedford Row knits his young brows over a packet of discarded papers, wondering what he can make of them, while another hastens to a girl who is beginning to blow hot and cold; that a harassed man with a Creditors' Meeting hanging over his head wends his way to the Docks, while in an obscure cellar another sits grimly fingering the pages of his *dossier*; that red men gesticulate in the Park while green ones stand impassively by; that some are abroad, corresponding in feigned writing, and others preparing to go abroad; and not one among them whose life is his unhampered own, but shared, jostled, and impinged on. So let Carlyle dream in his dappled half-light under the trees, with stony-gazing eyes and folded hands and a sparrow alighting on his shaggy head. Those four grim Brothers a little way up the river began where he left off, when the electric light was put into Charing Cross Station. They know better than he what is taking place in the Park that afternoon.

To tell the truth, nothing very sensational was happening. The sun that shone down on the Embankment Garden shone here on perhaps a score of tradesmen's carts and rostrums, a strong force of police, and a poppy-sprinkled assembly from which one would get a hundred diseases sooner than one straight blow between the eyes. A tall belted young man in khaki, with his shirt outside his trousers and Russian boots on his legs and a foreign-looking military cap on his head, stood back on a cart with folded arms, while a grey spectacled man in front of him ranted about Marx. Red-rosetted children sprawled and played on the grass, and the green badges moved among the red with inimical stares, as they had stared in Raffaeles'. Now and then a press-camera clicked, but the leading articles were already in type, ready to assure their Sunday readers that people in other countries might do as they liked, but that there was no nonsense about England as long as she had a park for elbow-room and air to blow off steam in. So she lets these have their say, and they crawl to their booths and vote, and then crawl back where they came from.... None the less, it was as if from the adjacent Round Pond the fresh bright water had been run off, wiping out the sunny little spectacle of skimming sails and children running after their craft and dogs barking joyously behind them, and leaving only the mud and broken bottles and rusty cans, drying in the sun, with only a muddy channel here and there for the sightless things that survived. One momentary scuffle there was, between a red and a green, and the cameras clicked again, but there was no real trouble. The police merely separated the men and let them go. The Peace was being kept.

Halsey, returning from seeing his uncle off by way of Blackfriars and the Embankment, saw groups of police off duty, some helmetless, eating sandwiches. Along the Embankment he sped that Saturday afternoon, past Carlyle, with never a thought that Carlyle had anything to do with him. Then he turned to the right, and doing so saw ahead on the pavement a stunted figure there was no mistaking. He stopped the car. In the circumstances this was well-met, indeed.

'Where are you off?' he said.

B.-J. turned. 'Hallo, it's you,' he said.

'Get in. Where to?'

'As a matter of fact, I was going to your cousin's studio,' the Goblin replied.

Better still. That meant that this time Bettine would be there. No further word passed between the two men until the Morris drew up before Audrey's door.

'Were you thinking of coming in?' B.-J. asked, his hand pausing at his pocket.

'That was rather the idea.'

B.-J. took out a key and pushed open the door for Hal to enter.

So that was it? Her key went the rounds, taken from Hal one moment, handed to B.-J. the next — unless B.-J. too possessed a key? The two men walked into the studio, where the Goblin's large sad eyes looked round. For him it was not Bettine's studio, but Audrey's, and it mocked them both with its emptiness. Halsey was not feeling sympathetic that afternoon. He spoke sarcastically to his old schoolfellow.

'Quite at home we make ourselves here. What do we do now? Have a cup of tea?'

'Don't,' said the Goblin, looking round Audrey's dwelling again.

'Glad I happened to run across you,' Hal went on. 'I've called twice, and I hate ringing bells with nobody in.'

B.-J. did not reply.

'What time are you expecting her?' Hal demanded.

'I don't suppose she'll be long, if you mean Bettine Frühling.'

'Who else should I mean? Have you seen her to-day?'

'Yes. She let me have her key.'

'Shall I be expected to clear out when she comes?'

'Don't, old thing,' said the Goblin again, sitting down in the sofa corner where Bettine had stitched the silver frock and gazing into the crown of his hat.

But Halsey saw in B.-J. the man who was responsible for everything. If it had to come, it might as well come now. He drew up a large chair, and leaning well forward in it, he clasped his hands in front of him.

'By the way,' he said, 'I've got the sack.'

The large eyes looked rather quickly up. 'What do you mean? From your firm?'

'No. I'm fired out of my flat. I just thought I'd mention it. I've got to be out within a week.'

'I'm sorry,' said the Goblin, looking away again. 'That's a nuisance.'

'Do you mean it's a nuisance for me or for other people?'

'For you, of course. Don't talk like this, old chap,' the Goblin begged. 'What are you being chucked out for?'

'I thought perhaps you could tell me that. They *call* it sanitation and the Inhabited House Duty, of course ——'

'Oh, damn!' muttered the Goblin under his breath.

'— but it's just as likely to be something else.'

'I'm sorry,' murmured the Goblin.

But he was sitting where Bettine had sewn the frock. He was answerable that the very clothes she put on her back had been on other backs, made to somebody else's shape, with somebody else's odour clinging to them. He was answerable that Hal should feel now like a hot beast about her, now miserable and hopeless. Probably he was about to thrust her still deeper into it that afternoon. It didn't much matter where they began.

'Where did you say you saw her to-day?' he asked abruptly.

'Bettine Frühling? I don't think I said where I saw her.'

'I hope it wasn't anywhere near the Park. I saw a bit of that, and it seems to me it's all part of the same rotten business ——'

'No, she hasn't been near the Park,' B.-J. assured him in conciliatory tones. 'Don't always put the worst construction on everything. Everybody can't always think alike, you know.'

Halsey flung it at him. 'Weren't there men enough, that you had to drag the women in?'

'Don't ——'

'It's a bit too late to say Don't. You catch 'em young all right! I don't mean Audrey so much — Audrey's thirty ——'

'Don't make it any worse, Hal. I told you I didn't want Audrey to go. She would go. I know what you mean. I feel a bit that way about it myself. But I thought — I thought it might give me a bit better chance — and, after all, there are some things women can get away with better than men ——'

'What things?' Hal demanded.

'You know very well I can't give you details. You've made a pretty good guess at some of it — other parts, of course, you're wildly wrong about. I think you're wrong about your flat. I don't mean it couldn't be done, but it's a bit pointless. I really think you're wrong there.'

'What, after the platoons of people who've been trooping in and out? Anyway, never mind that. What did Audrey really go to Italy for?'

'Of course, you can guess that. She took letters.'

'How?'

'It was her own idea. Strictly between ourselves, she took them in her paint-tubes. But' — the unhappy eyes were pleadingly on Hal again — 'if I hadn't let her go, she was never going to speak to me again, and I shall fetch her back myself.'

'Why? Because it's risky?'

'Only if they think they smell anything unusual at the frontier. She was well looked after going, and I shall fetch her back myself.'

'And the letters she sends here?'

'What letters does she send here?'

'Doesn't she send you any here?'

'Me? No. I wish she did — but it wouldn't do.'

'Messages, then?'

'No. You can't be too careful.'

'Not even messages by word of mouth?' Hal felt his heart sinking.

'None of any sort to me. Of course, I know she's all right. Bettine Frühling gets letters from her.'

'Bettine gets nothing — she has to — she has to — doctor before she can read it?'

'Certainly not on my account. 'Pon my word, old man. I don't know anything about that. She's no business to.'

And so much for Bettine's cock-and-bull story about the letter. Hal sank in silence back into the easy-chair.

But his own eviction from his flat and Audrey's letters to England were, after all, not the point. After a few moments he returned to the charge.

'And what about Bettine herself? Where does she come in?'

Here B.-J. began suddenly to fidget and to gain time. 'That's different. It's her job,' he said.

'Odd sort of a job for a young girl, isn't it?'

'Oh, I don't know,' B.-J. evaded, shuffling his small feet. 'She's always been a bit of a bird of passage.'

'A bird of passage? What do you mean? Do you mean that she's being sent abroad, too? Is she' — the words rushed to his lips of themselves — 'is she going to Russia?'

B.-J. looked up again. 'To Russia? Why to Russia?'

'Anywhere else, then?'

'Forgive me, old chap — I was a bit afraid of this —

but I wonder if she's quite the Early Christian Martyr you think?'

'I asked you if she was being sent away.'

'My dear lad, it isn't as easy as you think to get into Russia at present. No. She's not going there.'

'Then, where is she going? What are you doing with her key in your pocket? What have you come to see her about this afternoon?'

'I'm afraid I can't tell you all that. She does what she's paid to do — does it very well, too. And don't think me rude, but ——' He looked at his watch. He became a little more himself. 'Because, without being too pointed about it — I mean she gave me her key and told me I was to wait for her here ——'

Hal could have thrown something at him. Concern about Audrey was one thing, but, when it came to Bettine, *she* was no Early Christian Martyr. *She* did what she was paid to do and went where she was sent. And now Hal was being told that she had an appointment with B.-J. at which the presence of a third person was not required. His wrath boiled over.

'Very well,' he broke out. 'Things have been piling up bit by bit, so now we'll clear the air a bit. First of all, I don't want Audrey brought back from Italy by you or any of the people you mix with. You're the fellows who won the war and you're going to win the peace, too, and all that bilge. Well, it finishes for me when you bring women in. You get hold of a young girl who hasn't any mother to look after her. It's bad enough that you should take her to that place where they hobnob with Dago waiters and go upstairs to make reports about God-knows-what when they ought to have been in bed for hours. Now you think you can send her skittering off all over the Continent just as you like. Do your own dirty work. Never mind me and my bus and my flat. I can look after myself. But you told me it rested with you whether Audrey went to Italy or not. Well, if you're making any arrangements of that sort with Bettine this afternoon, I'd advise you to call them off or there'll be trouble between you and me.'

At that moment the outer bell rang and B.-J. jumped up to answer it; and in that selfsame moment of time Clarry Moss, away in Bedford Row, was deciding that the papers were too intricate to be dealt with offhand; and at Tilbury Docks, Percy Vibart was descending from his train; and in the Park the young man in the Russian boots was winding a broad red sash about his waist; and in the little Embankment Garden Carlyle dreamed on, in the shadow now, with the sun flecks a little way over to his left.

Halsey knew that he had spoken angrily, foolishly. That had been an ungenerous gibe about winning the peace. Worst of all, he had threatened something without knowing whether he could perform it. B.-J. might be willing to stretch a point for him, but what about Bettine herself? Suppose she wanted to go abroad and learned later that Halsey had prevented it? But he had little time for thinking. The studio door opened again, and neither Bettine nor B.-J. stood there. The man who stood there was the tall, bulky man with the square brown beard and the mild, relentless eyes behind the tinted glasses that he sometimes pushed up over his bald dome of a brow. His wide hat was in his hand, and with his other hand he drew the door to behind him.

'They want to speak some,' he said in a soft thick voice. 'A few minutes, perhaps. We wait.'

Hal looked at the foreigner who carried food in his pockets and ate because he was hungry to-day and not hungry yesterday or hungry to-morrow. He was taller than Hal and a good four stone heavier, and even if there had been no Bettine in the world, Halsey would probably have disliked him intensely. He advanced and stood before Hal.

'You are the young man who has been in Leningrad?' he asked.

'It was Petrograd when I was there,' Hal replied.

'It was St. Petersburg before that. You know Russia. So.'

Hal did not reply. If this Papa of Bettine's thought he claimed to know Russia, let him think so. He didn't look the kind who would make love to Bettine, but you never knew. There might be ways and ways of making love.

Papa had walked to the sofa. Bettine's doll lay there. Its little black cocked hat of velvet was now on its head, its hair was powdered white, and there was the tiniest patch of court-plaster on one of its cheeks. To its toes it was dressed in something that set the eyes on edge, something in colour between bright snakeskin and a passion-flower. Papa had picked the doll up. As calmly as if he had been removing his own glove, he stripped up the frock, examining the rest. Then he threw it back on the sofa again.

'So you were in Leningrad. You have heard of the Loubianka?' he asked over his shoulder.

This time Halsey did disclaim. 'I know nothing at all about Russia.'

'It is the prison. One of them. It is in the hours of Tuesday night and Wednesday morning that it is especially to be thought of, while you sleep. Not one week, but every week. There has been an upsetting between you and Mademoiselle Bettine, yes?'

In order not to say something heated, Hal did not reply.

'You will say it is none of my affair, and I apologise. All the same I take the liberty to mention it. It must please wait a little. The moment is not convenient. After ——' He gave a shrug, as much as to say that afterwards Halsey might do what he pleased with Bettine.

'I don't know what you mean,' he said shortly.

'You must forgive the not very good English. I explain. It is an upsetting. If it is love, it must please wait a little.'

'Without being rude, sir, may I ask what the devil my affairs have got to do with you?' Hal asked hotly.

'In England you may. I was not asked so in Russia. I do not mean it is a woman you upset. That is nothing. I break them over my knee. It is why they are caressed, to show them how much better it is to be caressed than to be broken. So in the Loubianka when a man will not speak. They show him another man who will not speak. Then they put his clothes on him again, and he is shaved and perfumed and cigarettes are given him to make life sweet. It is to show him how much better it is than to be as the man he has just seen. It is why women are caressed.'

'But this happens to be England, sir,' said Hal, revolted.

Though no sound came, a broad laugh overspread Papa's cheeks.

'As in your Hyde Park this afternoon. They sing the *Internationale* in your Hyde Park. And they send me my papers to go back to Russia! What you call that, my young friend? Salt on the bird's tail? Little pinch of salt? No. One sets foot over a frontier and one is never heard of again. What you call dope a man and put him on a Russian ship; he cannot help himself if he is doped. But salt on the tail — no.'

And it was a Russian ship that Percy had gone to see that afternoon, and this was Bettine's teacher of Russian, who petted women when they did as he told them and broke them over his knee when they did not, and Halsey remembered without mirth his young lodger's grotesqueries about Russia and Rasputin and crucifixions upside down. For that matter the whole world seemed to be turned upside down. It was what B.-J. had said, making signs to the big overcoated men with the week-end bags in the mirrored ceiling where the drinks did not spill from the glasses nor the flowers from the bowls.

But the next moment everything was all right again. The door opened. Bettine stood there in her leather coat and every-girl's hat. She said a few words in Russian to Papa, who walked out to join B.-J. There she waited, dazzlingly smiling, her hands already held a little way out.

'Has your little girl been a little beast?' she was saying softly and remorsefully.

They sprang together. Three wretched days were forgotten. He held her long.

'Darling, darling!... And now' — he framed the lotus of her face in his hands — 'come right away and marry me.'

She laughed. 'What! This afternoon! We couldn't possibly till Monday!'

'I'll wait until Monday if you'll give me all this evening and all day to-morrow. Though, by the way'

— he laughed as he remembered — 'I shan't have anywhere to ask you to next week. I'm hoofed out of my flat.'

'Hal!' she exclaimed, shocked. 'You aren't!'

'Clean out. I forget why. Kiss me again.'

'You can't want to kiss me after I've been such a beast to you,' she murmured with downcast eyes.

'Come and sit on the sofa.'

Presently he asked her what about her other two visitors.

'They'll be a few minutes yet. Hal, what have you been saying to upset B.-J.?'

'I'm afraid I lost my temper. It was about you really. We'll talk about it presently.'

'But I can give you only a very few minutes. And you can't have this evening or to-morrow. Perhaps on Tuesday or Wednesday evening I could see you.'

'Oh, hang it! Send those two away. You always have something else to do.'

'But I can't, Hal. I really must see B.-J. And Papa's only come to say good-bye.'

'Is he going away?'

'Yes.'

'Are you going with him?'

'No.'

'The impudent beggar had the neck to begin talking about you and me. He said I made an upsetting. Did you ever hear such nerve?'

But in his heart he rejoiced. If he made an upsetting, that meant that they were afraid of him. A little at a time; they would be more afraid of him presently. It was not the time to ask what they were talking about together in her bedroom. It was time to kiss her again.

'And now,' she said at last, 'do let me make myself fit to be seen. They'll be coming in.'

They did come in, to find them sitting side by side, he showing her the photograph Percy had given him, of his father, mother, Uncle Victor, Audrey with a bow in her hair, and himself.

III

With their grimy heads among the stars the Four Brothers of Lot's Road looked down that evening on London's lighted isometry. Rise on the auto-giro of your mind and hover with them. Never mind Carlyle, dreamless now under the trees; he is a has-been; drop your eyes instead to the coal yards and black mushrooms of the gasometers, to the spangles and mazes of lights, to the dainty necklace of Albert Bridge, to the broad Lord Mayor's Chain of the Embankment. A little to the north the King's Road looks as if a glowing finger had been drawn through Chelsea. A light babel of noise ascends from the Saturday night street-market at the top of the World's End Passage. The Brothers are proud of the streets they illumine and the trains they haul. With their round Moloch-mouths they talk things over at the end of the day. Why not, when you have only to turn a milled knob and a box with valves in it does as much? Here is power for a million boxes, throat-volume for a cityful of loud-speakers. Men can no longer do without the Four Brothers, and when you cannot be done without, you may talk as much as you please.

The northeastern Brother, the one nearest the streets and houses and crowds, was supposed to have absorbed a little of the essence of humanity into his bricks. Men and their labour were still his fuel and his service, but he had learned to distinguish one of them from another, and talked less arrogantly than his brethren of their fifteen-thousand kilowatt turbine generators, more of who was who and what went on. So say that night he rumbled as follows, as Carlyle had dreamed in the afternoon:

'That was a nasty little business down the river this afternoon. Another of the things that will never be cleared up, I suppose.'

'What was that?'

'Down at the Docks. The sun was on the roofs and our smoke was drifting that way, so I couldn't see very well, but some poor fellow seemed to have slipped down between the ship's side and the wall. They got him out all muddy, and I saw the Docks police carrying him away.'

'Didn't something like that happen there a few months ago?'

'Yes. That one fell down a hold and broke his neck. Nothing was ever found out about it. I wonder who the poor fellow to-day was.'

'One of the tugs or barges might be able to tell you on Monday.'

'I'd like to know.'

Another Brother spoke, the southeast chimney.

'Pooh, there are plenty of them. An odd one here and there won't make any difference. I'd rather be Us than them. At least we get all we want to eat.' And the southeast Brother gave a soft black belch of repletion in acknowledgement of what was happening in his furnaces below.

'Tell us how the show went off in the Park this afternoon, John. Once the factories close, Matthew and I haven't very much to look at.'

'As a gathering, rather disappointing I thought,' the northeastern Brother replied. 'Hardly more than a thousand or two. On a good day Stamford Bridge there gets ten times as many.'

'Ah, but during the war — *that* was the time to see them!'

'Yes, but don't forget they tried to bomb Us during the war.'

'I admit that was the most anxious time we ever had. I sometimes hear those guns at night yet. If anything had happened to us — they say a single bomb ——'

'Oh, they took good care of us. We'd double guards at every gate, and guns and searchlights and our own patrols, and aprons hung out on balloons ——'

There was a ruminative silence, during which the Brothers smoked. The deep voice of Cousin Ben boomed slowly up the river, striking nine.

'Is Ben working to-night?' one asked.

'Yes, they're sitting. I can see his light.'

'They say every broadcasting set in the world can hear that,' Matthew admired as the last reverberation died away.

'Wonderful thing, broadcasting.'

'Yes, they mayn't live very long, but there's no denying they're clever.'

'All the same I'd rather be a Thing.'

'What's doing on your side, John?'

Through his plume of smoke John was peering down into the Saturday-night street-market of the World's End Passage. The accident at the Docks had upset him a little. Somewhere in his deep vitals was always the wish that these seething, swarming, short-lived but endlessly renewed beings in their myriads below would look after themselves one hundredth part as well as they looked after him and his Brothers. If only they would have looked up, he felt himself to be almost on nodding terms with quite a number of them, most of the policemen, nearly all the salesmen at the barrows and stalls, the woman just going into the public-house at the corner, the little actress on the top floor of the Mansions who thought she wasn't overlooked and hadn't any blinds to draw.

'They're buying their food for to-morrow,' he said. 'At the shops and barrows, and taking it home in their baskets. I wish I knew their names. Ah! There's one I haven't seen for some weeks.'

'Who?'

'The one who raffled the motor-bicycle one night. I wondered what had become of him. He used to hang about the Lillie Laundry. He's with her now, carrying her basket.'

'Regular old gossip John's getting. Aren't there any fires or fights or anything?'

'No, they're just buying their food.'

'I'm beginning to feel a bit empty myself. Have they forgotten us downstairs there?'

It was a proof of the diligence with which they were served that at that very moment a man should open the furnace door and throw the Brother his meal.

A street or two away below, Clarry was indeed carrying Lottie's basket for her. The naphtha-flares shone rustily on an ever-changing pattern of faces, and women pushed perambulators with vegetables in one end of them and babies in the other. Fifty yards back from the market a dark shadow-play of heads was silhouetted against the windows of a public-house, but that was not the place where Clarry was going to buy Lottie a glass of port presently. She was teetotal except for port, which was sticky and sweet and did her pale cheeks good.

Not for weeks had she been so happy. It seemed as if a miraculously changed Clarry had come back to her. When before had he carried her basket for her, instead of standing by and wanting to know how much longer she was going to be? His deep new preoccupation, too! They had spent an hour that afternoon in the Natural History Museum, not in those parts of it that young couples frequented on rainy days, but for all the world like real students from the College of Art or the School of Mines, who go professionally and knowing what they want. 'Sections of spruces,' Clarry had demanded of an attendant, as bold as if he owned the place, and, with a folding magnifying-glass she had not seen before, he had pored over the specimens long and earnestly. 'Yes, dear,' she had had to say over and over again as he had talked about annular rings and altitudes and resonance and densities. She felt that Freda had been wrong to make fun of him and his bits of wood. And now he was shepherding her about so attentively that she didn't know how she felt. If it all turned out to be a dream, she never wanted to wake up again.

'Got all you want?' he asked her.

'Yes, dear — no — I'd like a small packet of toffee for Ma. She does so like it of a Sunday morning in bed.'

'Hi, Joe, two of them large ones,' Clarry ordered, holding out a ten-shilling note.

The toffee was put with the other purchases into the basket, and Clarry and Lottie turned down the Passage.

At the bottom of the Passage was a quiet saloon bar. Knowing that men do not really like to be seen carrying things, she wanted to take the basket from him before they entered, but he insisted on keeping it.

'Geniuses and suchlike lives round here,' he said. 'Artists and such. Scores of geniuses does their own shopping, and in future ages their pictures and things will be worth thousands.' And he held the door of the bar open for her to enter first, though the door had a strong piston and tried to cut her in two as she passed in.

'Two large special ports and a packet o' crisps,' he ordered, and swept aside an evening paper in order that she might sit down.

The bar was empty. It had a linoleum floor and a long seat of perforated bentwood under the window, and over the mantelpiece the framed yards and buildings of a brewery looked as if they were being looked down on from the top of a tall chimney. Clarry sat down next to Lottie on the bentwood seat and produced his packet of cigarettes.

'You ain't supposed to smoke with your port by rights,' he said, 'but that's only at big places like the Fishmongers' Hall where they drink the King's health. You can tell what sort it is by smelling the cork. How's your ma keeping?'

'She's always better of a Saturday night. It's looking forward to Sunday. She'll have toffee enough for all the week there.'

'You ain't eating your crisps.'

'I like a packet of crisps. You have some, dear.'

'No, you can eat all those' — and he leaned back with his legs straight out before him.

She had settled towards him. It was lovely having him like this. He had picked up somebody else's evening paper and was looking at the picture of the young man who had become sales-manager in less than a year; his mouth was compressed, as if he was telling the young man that what one could do another could do. Was he thinking of taking up one of those Courses? She had heard they were very good things, but then she had heard that Cells were very good things, too; she no longer trusted her own judgment. Clarry knew best. Suddenly Clarry pushed the paper away.

'You ain't remarked on my new suit,' he said. 'Didn't you notice I'd a new suit on?'

'Yes, dear. It's ever so smart.'

'A smart appearance and not using ignorant words takes you a long way, and now I've had this important information given me, I have all these things to study, appearances and being educated and the proper way to address people,' Clarry said.

'You didn't say what the information was, Clarry. It — it isn't anything to do with a stable, is it?' she asked timidly.

'No, I'm off stables. This is proper business, like when they float things. I haven't properly thought it out yet. I shall go into it with Vibart. Did I tell you him and me might be going to live together?'

She was suddenly silent.

'We're leaving where we are now. He wants a more convenient place. I'm looking out for one for him.'

The sound of the crisps in her mouth had ceased. She glanced at the new suit again. It was a brown mixture, very tidy about the shoulders, and he sat with his legs stiffly out like that because of the crease of the trousers. But she liked him better in his old clothes. These seemed to take him slighly farther away again. That morning had been a very worrying one at the laundry. All that week Lottie had been at the ironing-table, and the ironing-table was always getting the blame of something. If it wasn't buttons, it was tapes or strings or tabs, and one girl was supposed to do nothing else but see that the garments were all right before they were sent home again. But that morning an angry customer had called and had demanded to see the manager. What was the matter with them all at the Lillie Laundry? he had wanted to know. Up-and-down collars weren't supposed to be reversible. They were made to button one way. The collars were old ones, anyway, and Lottie had thought she was acting for the best in ironing them with the frayed edges where they wouldn't show. So she had got into a row. She hadn't said anything to Clarry about it because she hadn't wanted to spoil the lovely afternoon. His collar was a new one to go with the new suit. And now he said he was going to live with Mr. Vibart, whose very name Lottie dreaded. He was going into some scheme or other with this Mr. Vibart. Lottie's troubles all came back. Happiness seemed to be brought near only to be taken away again. She wondered what he was really thinking, sitting there with his brown legs straight out and his eyes on the framed brewery that seemed to be looked at from the top of a tall chimney....

She would never have guessed. Clarry, in his thoughts, was at that moment in a crowded Court of Law. It was crowded because Clarry was conducting his own defence, and counsel had flocked in from other Courts to hear the brilliance with which he vindicated himself. The charge was that he, Clarence Moss, on such-and-such a date, in a certain place to wit, had so arranged the draw for a motor-bicycle as to make the winning of the prize virtually a certainty for himself. And Clarry was scoring all round the wicket off the deadliest bowling the Bar could bring against him.

'I suggest,' Counsel thundered, 'that while others paid cash you paid nothing, and were never in a position to pay anything!' To that Clarry vouchsafed no reply at all. 'Answer the question!' Counsel roared, and Clarry answered that he hadn't heard any question, but only a low insinuation such as might have been expected from a mind so crawling that the reptiles themselves wouldn't live in it, but wriggled out all over his wig. Warned against contempt, he retorted that the reptiles themselves had brought contempt on themselves long ago. Of course, the judge wasn't allowed to laugh outright, but Clarry fancied that he gave him a glance of private appreciation from his perch up there on high. And Clarry was triumphantly discharged without a stain on his character, and shaken warmly by the hand by strangers as he left the Court, and what you can do with a motor-bicycle you can do with other things, and valuable information had come into Clarry's possession....

Other customers had entered the bar, and the landlord, a melancholy shirt-sleeved man with a drooping yellow moustache, was busy serving. He slapped down the over-filled glasses on the slopping counter.

'Hurry up, Fred, it's close on time,' urged a woman who resembled a Jack-in-the-Green of straggling cabbages and bundles of newspaper.

'One at a time, Mrs. Brady, I've only one pair of hands and Bert's busy in the other bar — plain gin for yours, Mrs. Webster?'

'Two more ports, mister ——'

It was in that moment that Clarry, waiting at the bar for his two ports with his back to Lottie, heard a woman's quick exclamation.

'Look out — somebody catch her ——'

On the rounded slippery seat under the window, Lottie was slowly falling sideways. In another moment she would have been on the floor, but a man had started forward and she slid into his arms instead. Then Clarry could no longer see her for the marketing women who flocked round.

'Took faint, that's what she is ——'

'She was all right not a minute ago — I was looking at her ——'

'She's with that young man ——'

'Here, young feller ——'

They had placed Lottie along the bentwood seat. Her lids, slightly parted, showed the thin slits of glazed eyeball, and her skin had turned the colour of lard and seemed to have tightened over her face. The structure of her coarse dark brows was suddenly apparent. She had upset her basket in her fall, and a man was gathering up her potatoes, a paper bag of apples, a few small packets of groceries, and her mother's toffee.

'She'll come round in a minute or two ——'

'Is she married?'

'I remember my Polly ——'

'Let her young man come ——'

Clarry had thrust himself forward. These fat women didn't even know that when anybody fainted, they had to have their heads shoved between their knees! He pulled off Lottie's dusty black hat. 'Get a jug of water,' he said, and the jug was passed from the counter and the water fell in rivulets down Lottie's dark hair and neck.

'There's no need to drench the poor thing to the skin ——'

'It's something she was reading — look at that paper in her hand ——'

'She wants getting off home to bed ——'

'Where does she live, young man?'

'And here's where we all get chucked out ——'

In the doorway stood the tall form of a policeman, and from far down the river the deep voice of Cousin Ben was calling closing-time.

'Has she lost anybody?'

'It's dreadful coming on you like that, no breaking it gently or anything ——'

'Is it a bereavement?'

'It's something she read in the paper.'

The jug of water was still in Clarry's hand. Slowly he set it down on the floor. From Lottie's tight fingers, which had made a hole through the face of the young man who had become sales-manager, he had taken the newspaper. The policeman advanced, his helmeted head tall among the shrubbery of bonnets.

'You can shut the door, Fred, and she can stop where she is till she comes round,' he said. 'Now, ladies and gents ——'

'Time, please ——'

But Clarry had begun the reading of the paragraph all over again.

Vibart. There was no mistake. Mr. Percival Vibart, of Vibart Sons & Co., Timber Importers. Aged fifty-six, well known in Masonic circles. 'The deceased gentleman was to have met his creditors at the St. Govans Hotel next Wednesday.'

But he had met his death at the Docks that afternoon instead.

His guv'nor's uncle — his guv'nor had had lunch with him that very day, his very last meal ——

'I think she's stirring ——'

It was the landlord speaking. Lottie had made a movement of her head. But the paragraph still held Clarry's eyes. It was unbelievable that such news should be in the same type as the rest of the paper. The landlord had shut the door of the public-house, but those who had just left were still gathered under the window outside, and a half-obliterated face was trying to look in.

'Well, I'll be cashing up — there's no hurry — you didn't pay me for those ports ——'

'In a minute ——'

The landlord passed behind his counter, there was a metallic jangle, and he began to empty the money from the drawers of the cash-register.

Clarry was reading the paragraph for the fourth time. To begin with, had his guv'nor seen it yet? Because if he hadn't, on Clarry would fall the duty of telling him. He would know the moment he saw his face. But why had they put that in about the deceased gentleman and his creditors? It might mean nothing, but it looked a bit like hinting at reasons before the coroner had even got his jury together. Because there would have to be an inquest. His guv'nor would have to attend it. And a funeral. And of course Lottie, coming upon it suddenly in the paper, had thought it was Mr. Halsey Vibart, the one that Clarry might be going to live with. But it wasn't, so that was all right. It showed Lottie's heart was in the right place. It was a credit to her that she should feel nearly as bad about it as Clarry himself would have felt.

'You can lift her up a bit now,' the landlord was saying, from among his silver and coppers. 'And will you pay for four ports or shall I put these back in the bottle?'

Clarry crossed the bar and put down the money. He drank his own port off and brought the other over to

Lottie. Her lids were fluttering and she gave a deep shaky sigh.

'Here, drink this,' he said.

She drank half of it, and it seemed to put a little life into her. With his handkerchief he wiped the spilt water from her dress.

'Was it that in the paper? Because that's all right. Not but that it's a credit to you taking it to heart, but it isn't him. It's his uncle. See, Percival it says. He's Halsey. Don't go looking like that.'

For there seemed to be nothing between her horrified dark eyes and the bottom of her soul. Eyes ought not to look as hers looked, nor souls to be seen so. Clarry talked uneasily on, anything to reassure her and to get that look out of her eyes.

'Not that it ain't bad enough being his uncle. Him and me had a conversation over the telephone once. But there isn't nothing to lose your equallylibrium over and go off in a fainting condition. If he hasn't seen it yet, I expect I shall have to be the one to tell him. Don't sit there as if you'd seen a ghost.'

At the word the lard-white skin crisped and tightened over her face again. A ghost? She saw not one ghost, but a thousand. Her eyes had never seen the face of this dead gentleman to whom she had carried the letter; there was not a face her imagination could conjure up that might not be his. He might have a yellow moustache like the landlord counting his money there, or no moustache; he might be fair like his nephew, tall, short, fat, thin, like Mr. Parratt, like Mr. McGovern, like Jacob ——

Like Jacob, who had promised her that her shoes wouldn't be worth walking in — Jacob who had threatened to cut her throat ——

'There'll have to be a inquest,' she heard Clarry's voice, 'because they can't bury the body without a coroner's warrant, and it has to be viewed, if necessary, in the clothes it was found in ——'

In the clothes it was found in! Whether he was dark or fair or thin, or whatever he was, his clothes would be much the same, because he was a gentleman; he would have silk socks and a soft-fronted shirt, perhaps, and light-weight underclothing and a collar not frayed so that it had to be ironed inside out; and the clothes would be all wet, with the mud and slime and weed inside them and in the pockets, and blood too, perhaps ——

In her imagination she would have to wash that clothing, to take it in her fingers for her punishment, while the dreadful tubs knocked out, not a Number, but 'A *Mur*-der! A *Mur*-der! A *Mur*-der!' three times one way, and then back again, three times the other, 'A *Mur*-der! A *Mur*-der! A *Mur*-der!'

'I don't like the look of that bit about the creditors,' Clarry was muttering. 'What would he want to go all the way down to the Docks for? They're hinting that he did himself in. They're hinting at it he had troubles on his mind, and that was his reason for doing it. And wait a minute — I've just remembered something ——'

He had, indeed, remembered something. He had remembered that Halsey had told him that his uncle had received some sort of a letter. Ho! He had thought there was more in it than met the eye! He'd better have another look at that paper.

She could bear no more. She rose unsteadily to her feet. Her mouth seemed to want to shout it aloud, the hands she stuffed into it seemed to want to choke back the words.

'He told me he'd cut my throat, he told me he'd cut my throat!' it came out, all mangled between lips and fingers.

'Who?' Clarry asked sharply.

'I thought it was all finished and over ——'

'You thought what was all finished and over?'

'Oh — Freda ——' she wailed.

The landlord was talking to somebody in the adjoining bar. 'Well, a quick one, I don't mind if I do,' a second man's voice was saying. 'Well, here's all the best. How's that young woman going on?'

'He was going to kill me ——'

'Who was?'

'Jacob was ——'

'Do you mean ——?'

Her knees began to fail again. She saw that clothing again, that she must wash and wash and wash forever, till she washed her own soul white again in the Blood of the Lamb. 'A *Mur*-der! A *Mur*-der! A *Mur*-der!' the tubs endlessly groaned. Even Freda couldn't help. She swayed, she gave a profound sigh.

'Lord Jesus ——'

The last thing her eyes saw before the blackness rolled over them again was the helmet of the tall policeman who entered the bar.

CHAPTER VI

I

'SAD, most sad and sudden,' Mr. Claude Parkinson condoled. 'It is an old saying but a true one, that in the midst of life. A comparatively young man, too.'

And he looked round the walls of his office at the prize cattle in profile, the photographs of agricultural machinery, the diplomas and the lithographed turnips in their splendour.

'Well, to get back to what we were talking about,' Hal suggested.

'The — er — the general position. Yes. On the whole, it is satisfactory. By no means unsatisfactory. If only the foreign market would pick up — but to come to the point. What would you say to a slight reduction in salary and a considerably increased commission?'

'I should say that if it's all the same to you, I'd rather remain as I am.'

Mr. Claude was turning over papers on his desk. He seemed to be looking for some that were not there.

'I'm looking for Banbury,' he said. 'We don't seem to have been doing the turnover we should round Banbury lately. Where did I put the Banbury file?'

Halsey had not really neglected Banbury lately, or hardly to speak of. 'I shall have the whole day at Banbury next Monday,' he said.

'Good. Our main hope's a trade revival abroad, of course, but we mustn't neglect the bird in the hand. By the way, speaking of abroad, didn't you once go to

Russia for your people in the — er — the old days?'

'I'd a few days there once.'

'Because Russia's in need of tractors, machinery, rolling-stock, anything with wheels, I hear — but I suppose we must wait for the trade revival. To come back to the Home Counties. I think for the present they need our *un*divided attention. Let me see, is it your own car you use or one of ours?'

'Mine. The firm pays for the petrol.'

'*And* the oil, of course, and any small running repairs. Put down whatever you think fair,' Mr. Claude agreed pleasantly. 'Car going all right?'

'Perfectly all right,' said Hal shortly.

'Capital. And now for our all-round effort. We always place every confidence in our travellers. Make your work your hobby, too, is the motto for a business man. That's why I thought the idea of a much higher commission might appeal to you. Be thinking it over. The man who is diligent in business shall stand before kings. And you may have the use of the shed with pleasure, for any reasonable time, of course. I'm only too sorry for your troubles. My deepest sympathy, Vibart — and don't forget, a good stir up for Banbury ——'

Halsey left the office and went out by the back way to the rear of the premises.

So he might expect that next! Then why the devil couldn't he have said so and be done with it? 'Look here, Vibart, never mind how we got it, but we have information about you. You aren't playing the game by us. We don't want travellers who get themselves mixed up in obscure movements and are chucked out of their flats. That isn't very reassuring about your uncle either, but, poor fellow, we needn't go into that.

There's Cuthbertson, he'd be only too glad to step into your shoes. Don't you think you'd be wise to be looking out for something else?' Why couldn't Claude Parkinson say so? Because of his local branch of the British Legion. Because you had to put yourself thoroughly in the right before you sacked an ex-Service man. Because business was business and it didn't pay to be associated with unpopular people. And perhaps because now that Percy was out of the way some obligation or other was less urgent than it had been.

And Hal supposed that it must have taken the Almighty some considerable time to perfect His paragon man, but he hoped it would be a very long time, indeed, before He made another being contemptible enough to stab in the dark by rumours passed on to landlords and employers.

It was Clarry who had had the idea about Parkinsons' yard. Things had happened so on the top of one another that Halsey had had no time to think of anything for himself. 'Find a warehouse somewhere and shove the stuff in; I'll go into an hotel,' he had said on the morning of the inquest.

That same evening Clarry had thought of a more excellent way.

'What do you want to go spending your money for?' he had asked. 'I've been having a look at that place where you keep your bus. It's a lock-up, and there's only packing-cases there. It'ld hold all you've got a treat, and they wouldn't be in nobody's way.'

And as Halsey had not seemed to hear, he had taken the decision upon himself.

Clarry had now a number of responsibilities to shoulder. The first of these was the care of Hal himself. His guv'nor should be shown whether Clarry was the sort to turn his back on a pal when he was in trouble. Another was the part in the catastrophe that Lottie had played. Here Clarry had not hesitated for a single moment. After all he had told her about Hoy Pollies and that nareefious lot, after all his warnings about Robespeary and carmagnolias and the Terror, she had brought this disaster upon Clarry's best friend. There was nothing even to discuss. What people sowed they must reap. The thing once done was done for all eternity, without hope of atonement or intercession. Clarry had been given no second chances in his life, and he was giving none. He had merely waited till she had come out of her faint; then, seizing her by the arm, he had got her along the Embankment as far as the corner of Albert Bridge. There he had put her implacably into a taxi, giving the driver his fare and her address. He had not even said good-night or good-bye. That was the end of *her*.

A further responsibility was that never — never, never — must his guv'nor know of the part Lottie had played. That might have compromised Clarry, too.

And he had a remaining responsibility, an immediate duty to himself. If Mr. Halsey Vibart's furniture went into one of Maples' or Mays' repositories, Clarry would be homeless.

So Clarry moved about on tiptoe in a taciturn and understanding silence, a Clarry of many cares. Who, for example, had sewn that crape band on his guv'nor's sleeve? Had he a soft impeachment? If he had, it would account for the frequency of his visits to town of late. Clarry was conscious of a twinge of jealousy. Women? The word was now odious to him. He tore them to smallest shreds and tatters and cast the fragments from him. Their very skirts was getting that short nowadays anybody could see halfway up to their knees; but it was what was inside their minds they wanted to show, not what was inside their stockings. They had no business shoving their powdered noses in between man and man. When his guv'nor began to talk again, he'd try to find out whether a woman had sewn on that band of crape, or only a tailor. In the mean time he must be getting on with the clearing of Parkinsons' shed.

It was an excellent shed for the purpose, with large double doors that locked, a good sloping roof of slate, and, with a little contrivance, plenty of room for Halsey's car at one end of it and the furniture at the other. Clarry had got half the packing-cases out and piled them up against the farther wall; there were also barrels, petrol-cans, a few broken pieces of iron implements, and a dozen or two hurdles. Then he would borrow a broom, have those cobwebs down, and get a bucket and water and scrub the cement floor.

It was Bettine who had sewn the black band to Halsey's sleeve. Halsey could not remember afterwards what she had said or whether she had said anything: he only knew that she had taken his head between her two arms and had held it strongly to her bosom, and he had felt as if he could have slept there for a month. He had wired to Audrey, and she had wired back, but a death in England when one is two days' journey away by *rapide* is a little like something seen through the other end of the telescope, and she had said nothing about coming back. Poor old Percy, who had only wanted a bit of glass and a few bees that fed on other people's flowers! He had never seen nor heard of Bettine. Now he could never do so. Strange, that when she took Hal's head into her arms, and drew it down to her heart and murmurously rocked it there, as his own mother had rocked it when she had sung her song about the cherries — strange that it should be Percy's last gift to him!

So she had put on the little silver thimble again and had sewn on the band, and something into Halsey's heart too that no time nor chance could ever take away again. He hoped it might be like this for somebody else when the time came to wear a black band for him. And the matter of the registry-office remained for the moment in the air. He did not speak of it, nor, directly, did she; but, with her hands gently making and unmaking little tangles of his hair, she had said, her full lips a-tremble, 'If I thought I could make you happy ——'

'You don't know how happy you make me.'

'I don't seem able even to feel the same for very long together ——'

'I shall always feel the same about you now.'

'When are you moving?'

'On Saturday. There's a quiet little hotel just off Lower Regent Street I once stayed at. It'll do till I find somewhere else.'

'I seem to have been finding somewhere else all my life.'

He moved his head on its warm breathing pillow, but did not speak.

'At any rate, you had somebody to lose.'

'The funny thing is that half the time you haven't an idea you're particularly fond of them.'

'No.'

'I don't want to move even to kiss you.'

'Oh, if I *thought* I could make you happy——!' her voice had trembled again.

Then he pulled himself together. Vibart Sons & Co. was now a thing of the past as far as he was concerned. There was little doubt about what Mr. Claude Parkinson had in his mind either. And to tell the truth he had never felt less like work in his life. His work his hobby, indeed! What cant they talked! If things came to the worst, he had still his pittance. He could realise a portion of his holdings and still not be absolutely without any income at all. Why should he even remain in England? What was the matter with Bettine and the sun, and the scented winds about her, and hot hillsides to lie on and glassy pools to bathe in and fruit as pulpy as her own mouth for her to eat, and London and its murk hidden a week away over the world's curve, its rubbish about work and hobbies forgotten in a lovely new dawn of life to come? He thought of it that evening as he stood looking at his sticks of furniture, half of it scrounged from poor Percy, and thinking, too, of rent to go on paying year after year, and lighting and heating, and cleaning, and breakages to replace, and the rest of the dreary vista. He thought of the old days when they had kept five inside servants and a gardener and a boy outside, all to pay and feed when the family went away for a couple of months in the summer, not counting the score or two of friends the staff would have in to help to get rid of the money. There might have been a good word to say for England in those easy times. She had had her flying start and still kept her lead. But now? If Bettine would only say Yes, what was there to stay for? And as he was asking himself the question, there was the sound of a key in the lock and his lodger entered, his brown eyes bright with triumph.

'All right — I've found it!' he cried, plunging head first with his news, too excited to be coherent. 'I was just walking past and I happened to look in at the door and saw some stairs. "Now, where does them stairs go to?" I says to myself, and I walked past the cars and up 'em and there it was. Can you come and see it to-morrow?'

'Come and see what to-morrow?' Hal was still looking at his furniture, thinking of the burden of it.

'This place I'm telling you about, boss. It's over a garage. I cleared out all them things out o' that shed at Parkinsons', but you wouldn't want the shed for more than a week while I got the other place ready.'

'Oh,' was all that Hal said as he began slowly to fill his pipe. He was trying to cut down his cigarettes.

But Clarry was bursting with the news. Over a garage in Kensington it was, and two young women were after it already, but they hadn't properly made an offer yet, and if Halsey could come and look at it to-morrow ——

'I can't to-morrow. I've got to be off early,' said Hal.

'It's on your way,' Clarry passionately urged. 'You don't know how these places gets snapped up, and these two young women ——'

'I was just wondering when you came in why I wanted a place at all,' Hal remarked, pressing down his tobacco.

The light died out of Clarry's eyes. 'You — you what?' he stammered.

'I'm in two minds whether to sell all this stuff and clear right out.'

To clear right out! Lumme! That was a sickener!

'But you said you had to have a place in London!'

'I know I did, but I may not be at Parkinsons' very much longer.'

Clarry's eyes were full of dismay. He dropped his voice. 'You ain't — you ain't got the sack, have you?'

'No.'

That other and still deeper fear fastened on Clarry's soul. 'You ain't — you ain't going to get married nor nothing?'

'I might want to get married.'

'Married!' Clarry could only wail.

'And perhaps go abroad for a bit,' said Hal, striking a match.

During his convalescence, Clarry had whiled away a portion of the time by making for himself a receptacle for his cigarette-cards. It lay on the couch now, its compartments neatly lettered, A for Astronomy and Armour, B for Botany, Bacteriology, Bridges, C for Cricketers and so on. With his heart in his new brown shoes, Clarry looked at the thumbed little picture-packs that represented his grounding in knowledge. He looked at *Dogs*: the Borzoi (Russian hunting-dog, where they massacreed the Royal Family and pawned the Crown Jewels); *Products of the World* (wheat was sown by means of machine-drills, the same that his guv'nor sold, that scattered the seed in light furrows in the soil); *Flags of All Nations* (Greece was the home of classical art, literature, and science); *Football* (Kirton's long and notable career, height five feet six and a half inches, weight eleven stone eleven). Beginning with these, Clarry had gone from strength to strength. Eton men were now his associates. On one of these the blow of bereavement had fallen, with the intensification of relations that always brings about, and Clarry was prepared to work for this man, to sweep down his cobwebs for him, black his boots, and sleep on his mat like a dog. And now the rising curtain suddenly stuck. Clarry could only just peep under the edge of it. His guv'nor going abroad! In that tray on the couch, Clarry saw, not the compact little data that had become part of his very self, but hostile hoardings of posters, oversized and menacing, posters of shipping and railway giants, leviathans with red funnels, dragons-de-luxe bearing down on Halsey, to hale him off to arid lands of sphinxes and pyramids and palms. And, most shocking of all, not alone, not with Clarry, but with a woman. He was going with one of the sex that had let them both down (but never, never, never must his guv'nor suspect anything about that). Girls messing about the place, with their snippets and bits of thread and their gloves hanging up to dry! Cripes, if it wasn't enough to take the heart out of a bloke!

'Where?' his voice came faintly to that. 'The Orient and them places?'

Hal had another go at the lighting of the pipe. 'I haven't decided anything yet.'

'To B.C.?'

'It's not likely I shall ever see B.C. again.'

'I never been in a ship. The fate of the Naronic is one of the mysteries of the sea,' said Clarry.

Halsey made no reply.

Clarry looked again at his guv'nor's still face, wondering whether Lottie's treason might not yet sense a useful purpose, after all. No, he decided, it was not the moment to say anything about girls.

He looked round the room again, at the thick red carpet, the yellow-shaded lamp with the black cats, the gate-legged table underneath it, the writing-table by the window. He was thinking of inventories. In them inventories they put every bit of a scratch down: table, chipped and polish gone; inkstain on carpet; cigarette-burns on fender; cups and saucers, cracked, assorted. Warehousing people had no human feeling about anybody's lairs and peanates. And if his guv'nor did sell them? Clarry knew all about dealers. Twelve-and-six for the table, five bob for the pots and pans. If they were only Clarry's!

'What do you suppose that writing-table would fetch?' he asked dejectedly.

'Haven't an idea. My uncle gave it to me,' said Hal, struggling with the pipe, and longing for a cigarette.

'You'd be lucky if you got fifteen bob for it. I wouldn't go selling things if I was you.'

'You might if you were as sick of the sight of them as I am.'

'It's just that you ain't feeling yourself, guv'nor, that's all it is,' Clarry proffered comfort.

'Perhaps you're right. Well, shove the lot over into the yard,' said Hal, and again the silence fell.

But Clarry considered it a good sign that his guv'nor should mention his uncle like that. It was better to talk than to bottle it up. He allowed the meditative silence to continue for a period that he judged to be decent and sufficient; then he spoke again.

'He was a Mason, wasn't he?'

'Who?' (Curse the pipe! If he could only get away to one of those sunny places with Bettine, he'd knock off smoking altogether.)

'Your uncle. I read a bit in the paper about his being well-known in Masonic circles,' said Clarry.

'I believe he was.'

'I seen them getting out at the Connaught Rooms with them things on them. Pale blue with gold fringe and sashes and pale blue cuffs. Are you one?'

'A Mason? No.'

'How do they get to be Masons?'

'I'm afraid I don't know anything about it.'

'They know one another by their grips and that, signs with their thumbs, and a bloke once tipped the sign to a judge just as he was going to sentence him to death. I read about it when I was getting my hair cut.'

'He'd have a hope,' Hal remarked.

'And another thing about 'em, they don't have women nosing around.' Here Clarry looked wistfully at his guv'nor again. 'I do wish you could ha' had a look at that place before them two sweet Hortenses gets after it,' he said. 'Just to have a look. Looking can't do no harm.'

Hal put aside the pipe and rose. He gave a long stretch.

'Well, I shan't have time to-morrow, and I really don't know yet what I'm going to do,' he yawned. 'Except turn in.'

'I think I shall sit up for a bit.'

'Well, good-night. This stuff had better go over to Parkinsons' for the present.'

Clarry sat in the deep chair thinking about Masons. He had had a reason for mentioning that. The question of Freemasonry might be well worth looking into. Masons, he understood, were a brotherhood who stood by one another. If a fellow was after a job or something, and he was a Mason and the other fellow was not, he stood a better chance of getting it. From the subject of Masons his thoughts passed to banking. Clarry was now the possessor of money. A hundred times, and a hundred times on top of that, he had reckoned up the figures. His living had been costing him nothing, or next to nothing. The brown mixture suit he was wearing had cost four pounds, his new brown shoes eleven-eleven-three. A few collars, cigarettes, a cinema or two before Lottie had got the push, a packet of toffee for her mother, four glasses of port — of his twenty pounds he still had nearly twelve left, and he didn't suppose a bank-manager would say No to even so small a sum as ten quid. Besides, the bank-manager might be a Mason too. Then Clarry would have a cheque-book and a paying-in book and all the rest of it just the same as if his tenner had been a thousand. And think what a fellow saved when he hadn't a girl to drag it all off of him a bit at a time!

He lighted another gasper, and from Freemasonry and banking his thoughts returned to the loft over the garage and the two young women who were after it. What weren't women after nowadays? There was a fellow wrote in the Sunday papers, Thersights, at least that was his pussydownim. 'Will the Next War be a Sex War?' Thersights wanted to know, and he knew what he was talking about, that chap did. Women hadn't got the same breadth of outlook as what men had, but that didn't stop them wanting it both ways. Take a case Clarry used to know, Harris, Rizzy Harris, Cleaning and Revenerating Furs. Was that Fur business Rizzy's own business and him the boss of it? Not much it wasn't; and why? Because he'd gone and put himself under a woman's thumb. She bossed him, that young forewoman did, and that was what they were all after, wanting to boss them that was under them and them that was over them too. He hoped she'd a fancy-bloke somewhere who bossed her a bit! The same with them two if they got that place over the garage. It was in a dilapidated condition, and Clarry hadn't the faintest idea who the young women were, but would they buckle to the job themselves, as Clarry was ready to buckle to it for his guv'nor? Not they! They'd get hold of some mug, and start him off on a soft impeachment, and he'd do it for them, the same as men did everything. Or take his guv'nor himself. Travelling was his job. Well, Thersights wanted to know what would happen when women took up travelling. Crumbs, but they'd sell things all right, what with them doing up their eyes and giving the bus-conductor a treat with their skirts and men not being able to say no to them! Clarry wondered if it would do any good if he left one of Thersights' articles lying about for his guv'nor to see.

But all was not lost yet. At any rate, Clarry had put him off the idea of selling his furniture. That furniture had associations for Clarry that somehow he wouldn't have trusted himself to say very much about. To auction it would have been to auction something of Clarry, too. It was all part of the same thing, part of the attention he paid to his finger-nails, his visits to the public baths, the brilliantine he put on his hair, his eagerness for knowledge, the whole new wide horizon of his life. And when Clarry made up his mind to get on, he would be sorry for the girl who tried to thrust herself in between.

II

Halsey took his last look at that top floor in Bedford Row while his furniture was still in it. He must now pay a little attention to Banbury. He knew, for he had tried it, the scramble it was to be in Banbury about Parkinsons' business and in London with Bettine at the same time.

So, 'Why, Mr. Vibart,' the barmaids and manageresses of his rounds began to say, 'we're seeing quite a lot of you nowadays! She hasn't turned you down, has she?'

She had not turned him down. A dozen times a day the thought of her came over him, warming him like a little summer inside him. Nothing now mattered but the comfort and peace she had given him when he had needed it. Even seeing rather less of her didn't very greatly matter. He would recover the lost ground for Parkinsons', marry her, and — well, there would be time to think of the rest after that.

So it came about that on the days when he did come to London, a series of trifling little accidents appeared the most natural thing in the world. He didn't even notice these accidents, but, if she had been printing snapshots, say, and had spread the wet prints face downward on a towel on the sofa to dry, picked up the towel and moved them. And the sofa was obviously the most convenient place for her paper patterns when she wished to judge of their effect. And stockings had to be mended and gloves cleaned, and it could easily happen that there was typing to do that ought to have been off yesterday. Before he could hold her hands, he had oftener and oftener to take the work from them. It was an aggravating thing, to be allowed to hold a pair of hands for certain minutes and then to have them remove themselves to take up their occupation again.

'They're lovely hands, but I wish they weren't always so dashed busy nowadays,' he grumbled.

'That reminds me,' she answered, jumping up. 'I've had a letter from Audrey. I'll fetch it.'

She fetched the letter from her bedroom, and, apropos of the hands, read how in the Via Sistina was to be found the Ultima Novita del Giorno — they took a plaster cast of your hand while you waited, which you could then give to somebody as a unique gift.

'I'd like one of those,' said Hal, whom the idea pleased. 'I wonder if there's anybody here who could make one?'

'I dare say there is. Then you could hold it all day and I could get on with my work,' Bettine answered, pulling the stocking over the hand again.

Then there came the incident of the paper patterns. He couldn't pick those up bodily, as he had the towel with the snapshots on it, because they were pinned down. He was making a place for himself among the pieces when she broke out almost crossly.

'Oh, *must* you sit just there? Look, there's a perfectly comfortable armchair. Get a book and read or something. No, I can't sit down. I want to get on with this.'

'Is it so important?'

'Yes, it is. I must make myself at least two new frocks.' She bit off a thread.

'Don't do that,' he laughed, watching her. 'You'll chip all the enamel off your teeth, and I like them as they are.'

'Then sit down and be good, or I shall have to turn you out.' And she herself pushed up the deep easy-chair for him, with the arms quite wide enough and plump enough for a second person to sit on.

All of which meant that he had to be good and to be careful, too.

Audrey's letter about the plastic hand didn't really contain anything that Halsey might not see. Macaroni (it went on) actually could be eaten quite tidily, because she had seen a young officer neatly moulding it in the bowl of a tablespoon before putting it in his mouth. The young man had been introduced to her afterwards, and it was he who had told her about the plaster hands. She had seen him on the morning after that, riding on the Pincio, on a black horse, with a vast cloak with a scarlet lining right down to his spurs. And so on. For a moment Hal did remember another letter that had had to be heated in a chafing-dish before it could be read. He wondered whether Bettine was showing him this one because of its innocuousness. But all that was dead and buried, and he never wished to hear of it again.

'By the way, what have you told her about us?' he asked.

'Nothing,' Bettine replied, ironing a little collar.

'Not that we're ——?'

'No.'

'Aren't you going to?'

'I suppose she'll see for herself when she comes back.'

'What about my telling her?'

'I don't think I want her told anything,' Bettine answered, and she brought the iron down with a quite unnecessary little thump. One would have said that once more she was cross with Audrey.

He could not hold her to the subject of the date of their marriage. So many things might happen in between, she said. When he told her that his job was not so secure as it might be, she did not reply for some moments. Again her lids seemed to droop of their own weight, and she threw back the valance of hair from her broad brow. He waited for her answer, watching the lovely immutable mouth and the hands that this time held the poised scissors.

Then, 'Do you really think they'll sack you?' she asked.

'It wouldn't surprise me. Lucky for me I could manage to scrape along for a bit without it.'

'What would you do then?' she asked.

Some spring in him seemed suddenly to dry up. She had asked it so casually, so almost impersonally; she might have asked anybody precisely the same question in precisely the same tone. This was the first time he asked himself, not whether she really wanted him, but whether she did not want him on another footing altogether.

The room he had taken at the hotel just round the corner from Lower Regent Street was a place to sleep in only. It was on the third floor of an establishment that did not advertise itself, and it was big enough for his bed, his suitcases if he pushed them under it, and himself. The number on its door was 201, that on the next door 203, and the row of numbers continued after that, with a floor above still to come. The whole place was a warren of passages and side-passages that crossed them, and people passed one another on landings with quick glances, but without exchanging a word. His car looked like being a difficulty. For the moment he was housing it in a bright crowded little garage off Jermyn Street, and paying for it more than he saved on his stuffy little room. It would be money in his pocket to put it back into Parkinsons' yard again.

On the evening when Bettine asked him what he would do if he lost his job, he returned to the hotel and went straight to bed. Somehow, contrary to his expectations, he fell asleep at once. But at some hour after midnight — his room was at the back of the premises and there was no familiar sound of traffic to give an indication of the time — he jumped suddenly up in bed. Either he had dreamed it, or two shots had rung out in quick succession from some distant part of the floor above.

He sat up listening, but there was no third shot, neither did he hear any opening of doors or running of feet. He looked at his watch; it was three o'clock, and everything was quiet. Could a person dream pistol-shots so distinctly that they brought him sitting up in bed? Perhaps. If those had been real shots, somebody else must have heard them and there would have been sounds overhead. But all was very dark and still. Best go to sleep again. He put his head back on the pillow.

But not to sleep any more. Those two shots might have been fired in some cavern of his head, startling the things that dwelt there, the bats and rats of his thoughts and apprehensions. Blindly these things began to beat their wings in the dark, to knock themselves, to fetch things like cobwebs down, to whimper. Twice or thrice only, just after the war, he had stayed at that same hotel; there had been nothing unusual about it; but to-night it seemed to smell of accident and disaster. He tried to tell himself that it was three o'clock in the morning, when all thoughts are black; but he had no more control of the images than if some pin had given way in his brain's steering. Percy's name in the paper; his own dash down to the Docks; the mortuary, the inquest, the verdict; all these things chased each other round and round and then began all over again. Complots and counterplots joined in the nightmare, with dark legions of night-riders, men who wanted to have done with the damned kid-glove business, Raffaeles', B.-J. And there was no Bettine to wrap her arms about his head and draw it to her breast, turning even Percy's passing-bell into a call to evensong. The image of Bettine joined in the revel, too. She wanted to get rid of him. She was quietly making rearrangements of her furniture, awkward little rearrangements, and thinking he didn't notice. She was always busy, thinking it cunningly out beforehand, stopping up the holes of every happy little opportunity. She was always going out, or coming in, or doing something, never turning her back to him with a silver frock to fasten up. 'What shall you do if you lose your job?' she had asked him, almost as if she stifled a yawn. 'Do let me get on with what I'm doing. Get a plaster hand to hold. Sit in that chair and read a book.' Her body was the same, but another spirit inhabited it, a spirit that said, and he heard it as plainly as he had heard the pistol-shots:

'Are you really as stupid as that? Can't you see? Has every little thing got to be hammered into you? Very well. I don't love you and I never shall. There you have it. You've been nice, and I'm very sorry, but I can't help it. Why did I let you kiss me, then? Because a girl with her way to make has to let herself be kissed. I don't let them sleep with me if that's what you mean. No, there isn't anybody else. There could be, a hundred. If I were to go into an hotel lounge and pretend I was waiting for somebody, I shouldn't be by myself five minutes. I've tried to be decent to you. I haven't told you all about myself because I don't tell anybody all about myself, but I've given you enough to guess at. And now I'm going out. There's somebody I want to see at the Piccadilly Hotel. You can drop me there if you like.'

He was not even to do that. They had a row in the Morris on the way. In his nightmare she grabbed the wheel, nearly running the car onto the pavement. Lighted faces were about him, portions of faces, eyes lurking beneath hats, painted mouths, powdered chins issuing from collars and cloaks and furs. She jumped out of the car. She, whom he would have taken to some sunny isle in a pansy-soft sea, was making for an island in Piccadilly. She was crying over her shoulder to him as she went, 'I'm tired of you, I'm tired of you!' He saw no other way for it to end. He wished it was over.

As he left the hotel the next morning, a little knot of men stood talking together in low voices on the kerb. From them he learned that two shots had actually been fired during the night, and that in one of the bedrooms of the top floor a man was lying dead. He was a young Black-and-Tan, home on leave.

It was merely another of Cousin Ben's little troubles as Head of the Family. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, his tall relatives up the river there, had only to carry men about and supply them with light, but Ben's task was by no means so simple. Except when he staged the quarrel himself, he had to keep their passions in check, and of late years he hadn't been succeeding very well. It wasn't only Ireland and the Black-and-Tans, just over the water there to the west. Just across the water to the south, he didn't know what the Quai d'Orsay was up to, and just over the water to the east, there was the Reichstag and what it was doing. Those narrow belts of grey water were not the comfort to Ben they had been. What they had formerly severed, the very ether now conspired to join together again. Switch on your three-valve set if you want an inkling of what Ben's deeper troubles were. Listen: Rome is speaking. It may be only a military band, marching up to the Quirinale amid a forest of saluting arms, but you are in touch with Rome at this present moment of time, which is something to think about. Listen: it is Radio-Paris. It may be only a *comédienne*, or somebody announcing the bargains of the Printemps or the Louvre, but it is Paris who is speaking, and the voice of Paris is an important voice. Or you get Germany with her Beethoven and her exchanges, or Madrid with her tango, or Vienna with whatever is left her, or Poland, with faint overtones when Poland speaks, for Germany wants to know who painted the Danzig pillar-boxes another colour during the night. And what is this chaos of atmospherics that runs uneasily round the whole world? It is Russia, and with the mere change of a wave-length God knows what we should hear. But Ben keeps that length to himself. Tamper with it on your home-made set and two fast-equipped cars start up and you are triangulated down to your lurking-place in a few hours. The whole apparatus is as open as the palm of your hand. But it only holds the secret the closer.

And when Cousin Ben does choose to speak out, the overtones hum far and wide. We pick up a little blue book and read, and then take off our spectacles and polish them, wondering whether we have seen aright.

For what is this? 'Published by Command of His Majesty, Cmd. 0000, to be bought at His Majesty's Stationery Office for three shillings'? And illustrated with facsimiles in case there should be any mistake? What are these initiallings, marginal notes, filing-numbers, queries, and signature-corners torn away? How did they come to be in Ben's possession? Who was bribed, whose safe rifled with crowbar and acetylene? Who carried those perilous papers in his pocket? To whom did he pass them? What would have happened to him if they had been intercepted?... We read further, and our eyes stop at the word 'Education.' What Education? What is all this talk of syllabuses, curricula, courses? Why is it desirable that students should know at least two languages and have had experience in District Party Work? What are these treatises on Dialectic Materialism and the *Internationale*? Do they take the place, for one man, of Latin Grace in Hall, for another of the neat little general-knowledge papers of the tobacco-trade? How long has all this been going on? How comes it that this is the first we hear of it? It is all very, very extraordinary, and the next time we pass the Houses of Parliament, we look up, half expecting to see a portent.

But all we see is Cousin Ben's expressionless face, stolidly marking time in the night.

Cousin Ben has powerful friends and instruments Fleet Street way. Crafty coves these are; they have a way of suddenly focussing their million-candle-power beam on some person that nobody had ever heard of. Here we are, for example: 'Uproar in the House.' Private notice of a Question has been given, 'To ask the responsible Minister whether his attention has been drawn' — here perhaps something about landings at non-immigrant ports — 'more particularly to the case of one Jacob Cossar, a Dutch subject for some years resident in this country.' Who is Jacob Cossar that Parliament should get excited about him? What does he do? Where does he live? Have the police been making inquiries about him? But there it is: 'Uproar in the House.' Back-benchers rage, the other side cheers ironically, somebody shouts 'Liar!' and is requested to leave, all because of Jacob Cossar.... But Ben's Fleet Street friends have a way of switching off the lights again as abruptly as they have turned it on. We have a queer feeling that for one moment a secret umbilical cord, palpitating with the hidden current of life, has linked up something crawling and obscure and unpleasant and best not thought of with Westminster itself.

But the day Ben does decide to give the pack the run of their teeth, that will be the day to see! Get the reporters on the job! Headlines will pale, for every word will be a headline. Sedition, Treason, Spy, Plot, will bristle like bayonets on the page. One can hear the clicking cameras now, greedy for the pictures. They will show the breaches in the walls, the pneumatic drills that made them. There will be double-pages and supplements and pictures flung on the scenes of a thousand cinemas, of the police holding the crowds in check, the men carrying out the sealed boxes, the guarded vans waiting to take them away. But only those engaged on them will know anything about the subsequent proceedings, the microscopical examinations and analyses of inks, the scrutiny of watermarks, the tests for forgery, the hunt for missing pages — only those whose business it is, and perhaps here and there a solitary outsider — Cyril Valentine Bigsworth-James, let us say, who happened to be strolling about that morning among the statues of Parliament Square, every once in a while lifting his eyes to Ben's face.

He had found it a benignant face, up to a point, but there is never any depending on Ben. It is an absolute condition of his existence that he must change his mind once every so many years. And as his late mind has always to be reckoned with, too, both minds working together inside his clockwork are sometimes as bad as not having a mind at all. B.-J., pottering moodily about among Palmerston and Canning and Fox and Pitt, knew that things were going none too well. Friends seemed still to be friends, but a shade less cordially than before. There had also been two or three mishaps and miscarriages. There was the Robbie Clayton affair. Robbie had been plainly told that he went at his own risk. Everybody was told that. But Robbie had not come back, and only a day or two before, leave had been asked in the Courts to presume his death. Then there was that other affair, of the man who had been shot dead in the middle of the most crowded restaurant in Berlin. He was not an Englishman, neither was the man who shot him an Englishman, but an Englishman was being looked for in connection with the affair, and B.-J. knew where the wanted man was. It was his job to stock that broad brow full of names, dates, numbers, hotels, times of boats and trains, and a hundred other things that were not knowledge to anybody but himself; that was why he was going to Rome. He would be off as soon as he had got this Bettine Frühling business fixed up. And about Vibart — he mused that morning. Vibart was perfectly right in what he said about the women. No more than the men had they any official protection —

quite the contrary sometimes. And if Audrey's cousin was really so mad keen on Bettine Frühling something might have been done about it, but he supposed Hal was pretty well tied by the leg to his job. Excursions such as had been planned for Bettine Frühling had sometimes to be undertaken at an hour's notice. That was why B.-J. was hanging about the statues that morning, waiting for somebody who was to tell him a date.

This person appeared. He was an immensely tall, fair-haired young man with Prussian-blue eyes and a mouth like a statue, and B.-J. did not address him by any name. Their shadows side by side on the pavement, the one like a stretched rope, the other the Goblin's stumpy coil, only a little exaggerated their respective heights, and, as they moved away to the grass-plots, the leaf-shadows came and went on their faces, while Canning and Palmerston, Fox and Pitt, stared eyelessly at the sun.

'Not till the eighteenth you say?' the Goblin asked.

'Not till then.'

'Did you get across without any trouble?'

'No trouble at all.'

'I don't altogether like the idea of sending her alone,' the Goblin muttered. 'I suppose you couldn't be there to look after her?'

The very tall young man shook his head. 'Out of the question for many reasons.'

'Could you detail anybody?'

'Much better have somebody from your end.'

They walked for a minute in silence. Then, 'I suppose you've heard they want to presume the death of our young friend who went to Silesia?' the Goblin remarked.

'No, but it would be quite safe to do so,' the other replied.

'You don't know anything about that business?'

'No.'

'When are you going back?'

'As far as I know the day after to-morrow.'

'Shall I see you to-night?'

'There?' A slight jerk of the head in a northerly direction.

'Yes.'

'Yes.'

'Then we won't be seen together longer than we need now.'

The two men walked away in opposite directions, and one of Cousin Ben's fingers ticked fractionally forward, as much as to say that something or other was now only a matter of time.

That afternoon found Halsey Vibart in the drawing-office of the firm's Willesden works. A tractor was being made to a particular specification, and he was checking the details on a scale-drawing. Or rather he ought to have been doing so; actually he sat with his head between his hands and his thoughts a thousand miles away. That dream of the night before still hung darkly about him, wrapping him in the haggard mantle of its prophecy. All that morning, in the sunshine, going about his business, he had seen Bettine's face under the Piccadilly lamps again, jostling with other faces and fragments of faces, made-up mouths, powdered chins, lurking eyes. As plainly as he had heard those two muffled shots that had proved to be so tragically real, he had heard her voice again as she had fled from him to the island, crying 'I'm tired of you, I'm tired of you!' He did not know what he was doing in that office. He had no right to be taking Parkinsons' money at all. Many better men would be only too glad of the job that he knew he had neglected and played the fool with. His head ached. He stared unseeingly at the drawing before him. One of the draughtsmen entered.

'Mr. Vibart wanted at the telephone,' he said.

The telephone was in the adjoining office, where the manager sat at his desk. This is what the manager heard a moment later:

'Speaking.... Who?... Oh, my God, something's happened!'

The manager looked quickly up. There followed an interval during which he heard nothing, but he did not take his eyes from Halsey's face. Then Hal drew a deep breath, apparently of relief, and spoke in a less startling tone.

'No. I left there two days ago.... At the Maximilian Hotel, but I only sleep there.... Yes, M for Mother, A for Auntie, X — the Maximilian.... Why not? I don't know what you mean...'

The manager raised his brows.

'Yes, you did, confound you.... Yes, I knew when I heard your voice it was something about her.... Very well, at the same place, at seven.'

The receiver clicked on the hook, and the manager leaned back in his chair.

'No bad news, Vibart, I hope?' he said. 'You aren't looking particularly fit to-day.'

'Had rather a rotten night last night, that's all,' Halsey grunted.

'What's that hotel you were speaking about just now? You don't mean to say you're staying there?'

'The Maximilian? What's the matter with it?' Hal asked curtly.

If there was anything in the evening papers yet about a Black-and-Tan who had been found shot dead in a bedroom just round the corner from Lower Regent Street, the manager had evidently not seen it yet. He merely gave Halsey a little well-meant advice.

'It's only what I've heard. I let those things severely alone myself. But the Maximilian hasn't much of a name. It's supposed to be one of these secret headquarters — Irish, I believe — I'm only saying what I've been told — anyway, the sort of place best given a miss ——'

'Out of the frying-pan,' Hal muttered.

'What's that?'

'I said it used to be all right a year or two ago.'

'I thought you had your own flat.'

'I had. I've left it.'

'Well, I shouldn't hang round the Maximilian if I were you. There's bound to be a round-up before long. How's Burnett getting on with that drawing?'

It was in the underground lounge with the glass ceiling that Halsey met the Goblin at seven o'clock that evening. The place had filled up, and they sat apart in a corner, talking in undertones.

'Good God, man, the Maximilian!' the Goblin was exclaiming. 'As if I could show my face there! After last night's little business, too; my hands are full enough as it is.... Anyway, as I was saying, I rang you up at your old place, and Owen said he didn't know where you'd gone. Then I got on to your people in Holborn, and they said you were over at Willesden. What made you jump like that?'

'Like what?'

'Over the telephone. "Oh, my God, something's happened!" Nothing to do with the little affair at this hotel of yours, has it?'

'No.' But he did not tell B.-J. what the night's real horror had been, nor how it had lasted all day, and held out no better promise for the morrow.

'Well, as I say, she's going to Berlin on the eighteenth. I told her she'd have to have somebody with her, and that seemed all right, and the rest's up to you. How do you stand with your firm about leave?'

'Oh, it isn't that.'

'I'm starting for Rome myself the moment she's off. And I promise you it's her last trip. There's not going to be any more of it for either of them.'

'Does she want to go, or are you making her?' Hal demanded.

'Oh, she wants to go ——'

'Because, if she doesn't, and I thought you were making her ——'

The rest of the sentence was an unspoken menace, and the Goblin laid his hand on Hal's knee. He had his troubles, too. The first faint ominous signs of a general cracking-up were already warning him that he had better say good-bye to his own dream. It had not been an ignoble dream. Sometimes it had even lent to his serious bulging head a dignity, as Velasquez could not help something of his own dignity shining on the faces of his dwarfs. Hal had not shared it, but B.-J. was doing the best he could for Hal. He spoke earnestly.

'I hope you won't mind my telling you straight out what I think,' he said. 'I'm offering you the job because you seem to want it. It's not for me to call you a fool. I'm a fool, too. But the cases are different.

Except for certain things I'm not allowed to talk about, I don't know anything at all about Bettine Frühling. She's straight, in that way — if I hadn't been perfectly sure of that... Anyway, the whole point is that she's simply born for just that one job in life. She likes playing with fire and not getting burnt. It just happened like this: if it hadn't, it would have been something else. And it's an entirely different thing my fetching Audrey back and your going off with her. People would only conclude I was some sort of a pet monkey she carted about with her. But there you two'ld be, travelling together, having your meals together, putting up at the same hotel — not engaged to her, not as far as I know, that is——' and he glanced at Halsey.

Not a muscle of Halsey's face moved.

'Not engaged to her. Don't think *I* mind. Anybody can go off with anybody he likes for all I care. If it comes to that, I wish you luck, as long as it doesn't interfere with anything else. I'm merely showing you what it'll look like and offering you the job. And if you want to know what I really think, I think you'll probably come back just as you went, and you'd be a fool to take it on.'

Hal was gazing at the table without seeing a single thing that was on it. A few men went out of the lounge, a few more came in. Foreshortened in the ceiling like the Goblin himself showed the heads, hatted heads, uncovered heads, sleekly brushed heads, bald heads, the flowers that did not fall, the drinks that did not spill. There was talk, laughter, the slap of the cork-drawing machine, the giving of change. The Goblin had evidently said all he had to say. Not a word of it but was true. She — both of them — would be compromised up to the eyes. The possibilities, the opportunities, the temptations, the risks that would nearly drive him mad would only make her own brain the cooler. Probably she would want to sign her own name in the hotel-register. Short of that, he was given his chance, and B.-J. told him plainly that he would be a fool to take it.

He heard her voice again as he had heard it in the dream, flung at him over her shoulder:

'Girls have to let themselves be kissed. I don't let them sleep with me, if that's what you mean ——'

And all at once he came out of the dream with a start.

'Do you know if she's at home this evening?' he asked the Goblin sharply.

'No, she's not at home this evening.'

'Are you seeing her?'

'Most likely.'

'In plain English, you're telling me I can't see her?'

'Not this evening, I'm afraid.'

'Do you know what you are?' Hal had half risen.

'I know that the eighteenth's the date, and I can easily find somebody else. I'd much rather for your own sake,' the Goblin answered, seated.

'I think it's time we said good-night.'

'You'll let me know soon, won't you?'

With a 'Yes' and a hard look Hal walked out of the lounge.

He had neither dined nor wished to dine. The thought of going to a show made him shudder. He wanted to do what his father and grandfather would have done when their spirits were troubled, to walk about all night. But nobody walked nowadays. He did not walk any farther than the Jermyn Street garage. There he got out the Morris.

Not to go into the country. The night skies and the cool breast of the earth would have brought him no comfort. Lamps and streets and crowds and faces were what he wanted. The more the faces were the faces of strangers, never to be seen again, the better; he neither wanted to know nor to be known. A car backfired somewhere, and those two shots began to ring newly and persistently in his head. He had been asleep; those two muffled reports had woke him; to what? To that nightmare of Bettine. And the hideous part of the nightmare was its stark truth. It was true, as the shots were true, and as it was true that in the morning a man had been found dead. The Goblin spoke the truth about her, too. She was a bird of passage. (He hadn't a notion where he was driving; he drove, accelerating, slowing down, missing people and things, watching the tail-light ahead; it was something mechanical for one half of his brain to do that the other might be left pitilessly clear.) She liked it, the heart in the mouth, the collisions with men, the escapes. (He was driving skilfully, confidently, judging matters to an inch.) And suppose — for she had lied about the letter and the chafing-dish — suppose she had *not* always escaped? Suppose she had merely said so? ... Fool that he was! She hadn't even said so! His brain must be softening or something to let a dream seize on him like this! (Heavens, but that fellow had nearly got it, stepping off the kerb without looking where he was going!) To hell with the dream! Did it follow that because the half about the two shots had turned out to be true, the rest, that hadn't happened yet, must be true, too? It was all nerves, a thing he hadn't had since the war. Damn the Goblin for saying it was her nature and nothing could alter it! It would be altered once he got her out of it all. Her last trip? Yes, Halsey promised B.-J. that — B.-J., who wished him luck as long as other things weren't interfered with — B.-J., who didn't care who people went away with nor what they wrote in the hotel-register — B.-J., who employed her in crooked ways for the sole and simple reason that she *was* straight herself ——

And if the other was a dream, Germany would be a reality. (Where was this? Holloway? Highbury? Stoke Newington? What crowds of people there were, what miles of streets!) His thoughts about her caught fire. He didn't want to be her father, brother, guardian; he wanted her, the hair and hands of her, that back to answer to his kiss with its pressure, the warm blood of her, with or without what went on in her living brain. He supposed it would be his business to be at her side every moment of the time; if only she would marry him before they went, it would solve everything. Already the dream was loosing its hold on him. He knew now where that dream had come from. He had merely got the wind up because she was busy sometimes when he didn't want her to be, cutting out her patterns on the sofa, dressing her doll, moving her furniture about, a million to one without any intention at all. No wonder she got petulant with him if he showed himself touchy with her. He felt better now. It had been a good idea to get the car out and drive about among the anonymous crowds.

It was early, not yet ten o'clock, and that part of London was amusing itself. Heavens, the throngs of people, parading before the closed shops in the May night, filling the bright public-houses and bright cinemas and bright trams! After all, it was something of a feat that they should be governed at all, so that they let somebody else spend their money for them, and tell them what they ought to think and how they ought to feel and live pretty well half their lives for them. The long side-streets, perspectives suddenly dimmer, were peopled by lovers. More and more lovers packed the cinemas, holding moist hands, not made of plaster-of-Paris, so that presently the world should be more populous still. Now the public-houses were turning out, with talking groups lingering before each of them. People, people, people! Hal had been in the country too long and had forgotten how many people there were. How did they all manage to live? Simply by feeding each other, and clothing each other, and amusing each other, and building houses for each other? And what about his own job if he went with Bettine to Berlin? B.-J. had hinted that his firm might give him leave. They might. On the other hand ... Ah! He knew where he was again now. This was Clerkenwell, that Hatton Wall, that Hatton Gardens. He was approaching Holborn again.

He turned into the familiar thoroughfare. It seemed odd no longer to have a flat in Bedford Row. And that was rather a nuisance about the Maximilian Hotel. There was really no reason why he should leave the place, but he didn't want to make life any more complicated than it was.

At that moment the car began to do so for him. Not two hundred yards from Parkinsons' it was beginning to miss and to make expiring noises.

Idiot that he was! He had been running on the reserve tank, and the petrol had failed.

Well, it was fortunate that it had happened just here. He would do what he had contemplated before, put the car back into its old place in the yard. The keys both of the outer gates and of the shed were in his pocket. He got out of the car, and, no very great distance from where Clarry Moss had formerly popped up out of nowhere in time to give him a hand, began to push it past Parkinsons' shop-front and round the corner into the side-street.

III

This selfsame Clarry hadn't half made himself comfortable—not half he hadn't, them and their Inhabited Houses! It took a bit of wriggling into unless he wanted to bring things down on the top of his head, and he had to be up bright and early in the morning before anybody was about, but otherwise he didn't see any reason why he shouldn't remain there till further orders. Quietly—come and have a peep at the abode Clarry had made for himself.

You tiptoe across Parkinsons' yard to the two double doors on the right. All is in darkness, and you try to peep through the keyhole. You do not know that a movable little wooden plug stops it, but suppose you did, and with the end of a pencil or something else small pushed the plug in. You know already, Parkinsons' knew, that some of Mr. Halsey Vibart's effects are stored in their shed. Among them burns a light. It is the modest light of Clarry's electric pocket-torch.

Its beam moves about among the furniture that fills exactly one half of the place. If Clarry is going to bed, it lies on the edge of the dressing-table, and its narrow parabola shows Clarry's hairbrush, his toothbrush, comb, bottle of brilliantine, two collar-studs, and the collar with the tie in it hanging over the corner of the looking-glass somewhere in the penumbra. If he is getting up in the grey dawn, it moves about the floor in search of his boots, which are probably somewhere on the line where the furniture stops and the space that waits for the absent Morris begins, with an indelible oil-patch to tell where the car has dripped. If Clarry is reading, the torch illumines his page. There is much disorder of sacking and brown paper, but that is really camouflage for the daytime. The furniture is piled up object on object, an insecure pagoda of miscellaneous furniture that touches the sloping rafters. Clarry and his light are sheltered in one of the ledges of the honeycomb. We cannot replace the plug in the keyhole from outside. Let us withdraw, leaving Clarry to look for it in the morning.

He lay reading in bed that night, now and then taking a bite at an apple. His brow was knitted with concentration, and from time to time he put the torch down among the bedclothes, half closed the book, and his lips moved. The Questions-and-Answers came at the end of each chapter, and Clarry was learning them by heart.

Suddenly he sat up, intently listening. The next moment the torch was out and Clarry was lying as quiet as a mouse.

Somebody was doing something to the outer gates. The police trying them, perhaps — but no; there was a faint scraping of iron; the gates were being hooked back. There had been no sound either of car or lorry, but the gates were being made ready to admit something. The object above Clarry's head as he lay was Halsey's kitchen table; its four legs stood on the bed corners, the bottom of its knife-drawer looked down on him. The storey above that consisted of various chairs, and in the dark it was necessary to move carefully. Softly Clarry wriggled out of bed. He groped his way to the door, took the plug from the hole, and peeped. A lighted car was being pushed in.

The packing-cases that had been moved to make room for the furniture did not allow a straight run in, and the pusher of the car had to make two locks of it. A car that has to be pushed is always a dispiriting sight; that that particular car should once more have to be pushed had brought Clarry's heart into his mouth.

They'd been having another go at him! First him, then his uncle, and now him again!

But, at any rate, his guv'nor himself was all right. He had got the car round so that a dazzling beam hit Clarry and the keyhole full in the eye. He was advancing to open the door. What was Clarry to do?

He gave one momentary flick of the torch to show him the way. Then he dodged swiftly back into bed.

The farther door of the two was drawn open and two indefinite orange circles appeared on the plaster wall. Slowly the familiar bonnet crept in. The two circles of light grew smaller and brighter on the plaster, the lamps were within a foot of the wall. The brakes were put on. The lights were switched suddenly off. There were sounds at the door. His guv'nor was going straight out again.

Suddenly Halsey called out: 'What the devil's that? Who's there?'

Well might he exclaim, to find from the recesses of an empty shed the flash of a torch turned on him. He plunged his arm into the car again. The whole wall was suddenly flooded with the full brilliance of the headlights.

'What's happened this time, guv'nor?'

It was Clarry's agitated voice, from somewhere among the furniture.

Halsey stared at the wall.

'You! What the devil are you doing here?'

'It ain't your steering this time and it ain't your lights. Shall I have a look at her?'

'Ran out of petrol, that's all. What's the meaning of this?'

Clarry's heart returned to its proper place. In his niche between the mattress and the underside of the kitchen table he shut off his torch. He raised himself on one elbow.

The astounded Halsey had advanced. He was looking at that incredible erection of furniture, fitted into the shed like a puzzle, at the sacking and brown paper, at the foot or so of elbow-room the lad had ingeniously left for his personal belongings. He was looking at Clarry himself, once more installed in Halsey's own bed.

'So you just moved yourself from over the way here?' he asked.

'Yes. Cripes, the turn you gave me when I saw you pushing that bus in!'

'You don't imagine you can stay here, do you?'

'I cover it up in the daytime so as nobody'd guess. And there's heaps of room for your bus.' If Clarry had chosen to make a rather long arm the running-board of the car would as a matter of fact have made a very convenient bedside table.

'But Parkinsons' yard isn't a lodging-house. We've been chucked out of one place.'

'What the eye don't see the heart don't grieve, boss. I ain't going to live three in a room no more,' Clarry answered.

'What do you do in the daytime?'

'Study,' Clarry replied promptly. 'The Park ain't no hardship this time of year, and the fresh air enhances the brain. Look.' He held up his book. 'Company Law. Outlines of. I done three chapters, Q's and A's and all. Switch your headlights off, guv'nor. You're only wasting 'em. Lumme, with the car here it's a regular country-house electrical constellation! And shut the door. Is them outside gates shut?'

Mechanically Halsey closed the door of the shed and switched off the more powerful lights. Again the blurred eyes of the driving-lamps made mysterious the plaster wall, the rear-light a crimson stain at the other end. Halsey sat down on the running-board. At any rate nobody could say his young protégé wasn't a sticker. How many times had he appeared when he was least expected? Popping up from the crack of a pavement after a motor accident. With those two stiffs in the blue overcoats in the lounge with the ceiling. Lying out on the lid of a bath with a bowl of blood and water on the floor. And now here, like an animal curled up in its burrow, with a forest of furniture over his head.

'I expect them two young women's snapped up that place by this time,' he was saying gloomily.

'But look here, you'll have to clear out, and the furniture too,' Halsey told him. 'I'm going away.'

Silence descended on Clarry. He began to flick his torch in and out over the bedclothes.

'I'm going to Germany,' said Hal.

In the tone of one who had known all along that disaster was in the wind, Clarry asked, 'Them Huns?'

'If you like.'

'What about your job?'

'I shall ask them if they can let me take my summer holiday now. But I know what they'll say.'

'What?'

'No.'

'Then what?'

'I shall resign.'

'And get married?'

Halsey did not answer.

'And get married, guv'nor?' Clarry repeated piteously.

'I don't know.'

Silence fell again. The very stillness of the lights on the wall, the fixity of the red light at the tail, seemed oppressive. Flick went Clarry's torch, as if it strove to make away with some spell. A great grey spider crawled along the edge of one of the chairs under the rafters. Flick went Clarry's torch again.

'When would you be going?'

'The eighteenth.'

'How long for?'

'I don't know.' Odd, that he hadn't even asked.

'And get married when you come back?'

'Or before we go.'

'What, do you mean to say she's going with you?'

'I'm going with her. And by the way' — why had it never occurred to him before that this lad might possibly have seen Bettine at that hated place? — 'have you been to Raffaeles' often?'

Clarry became wary. 'Not to call often, boss.'

'How often, before that night I found you there?'

'Twice.'

'Who do you know there?'

'B.-J. And you.'

'You can leave me out. I've only set foot in the place twice.'

Clarry gave him a quick look from the bed. 'You said you'd only been once.'

Hal remembered the night when Bettine had dropped two shillings into the automatic racing-machine. 'And once since then. Do you know any of the women who go there?'

'There's one called Bella Griggs,' said Clarry, more cautiously still.

'Nobody else?'

'No. She — your young lady — she ain't one of them, is she?'

'Not if I can help it. What do you know about them?'

Clarry's torch began to flick again. Here his guv'nor was at it again, trying to get Clarry to talk about what he knew. Then Clarry'd have B.-J. down on him like a ton of bricks. It couldn't be done. But there might be another way of proving his loyalty to those who paid him and his devotion to his friend, not to mention showing up that other knock-kneed sex in its true colours. There was no reason at all why he shouldn't blackguard the other side. If his guv'nor got married everything was lost already. Desperate cases needed desperate treatment. Clarry leaned forward across the edge of the bed.

'There's something it's been on my mind to tell you this long time, guv'nor,' he said earnestly. 'I wasn't going to, but circumstances has changed.'

Halsey took out a cigarette, but apparently only to look at it, not to smoke it.

'It's about that first time you and me got acquainted. Liver sausage and potato salad and gherkins, that night. I ain't ever told you what happened after that.'

He paused. 'Well?' said Hal.

'Hardly thirty yards from your own door. You'd never guess what I mean.'

'Well, what do you mean?'

Without a qualm Clarry threw Lottie to the wolves.

'Listen,' he said. 'Do you remember that young woman that came to see me?'

'Your girl? Yes.'

'My girl!' Clarry looked as if he was about to spit. 'You can bet your boots all *that's* off!'

'Oh?'

'It was her I saw that night at the corner of the street. I knew her by means of the properties of night-visibility black-and-white check skirts possesses. What was she doing there at that time of night?' Clarry's face was pushed forward into the light.

'I really don't know. Look out, or you'll be having all that stuff down on us both ——'

For Clarry had started vehemently forward. The side-lights glowed dull on the plaster, the furniture was a mysterious tottering maze overhead, and Clarry's voice shook too with righteous passion.

'No, and you wouldn't guess in a hundred years! Where had she been to that afternoon? Suppose I was to tell you she'd been to Vibart, Sons & Co., Timber Importers?'

'What for?'

'To take him that unanimous letter. *Now* fall off that running-board if you like!'

But Halsey did not fall off the running-board. By what stages he had come to divine as much as he did he could not have told, and now that he had a glimmering of the shadowy outline of it all merely seemed many,

many days after the fair. Poor old Percy, who wouldn't have minded so much if she'd only been smartly dressed! Poor girl, who had looked at Halsey as if he had been going to whip her and had asked in that agonised voice where Clarry had got all that money! The ruthless little ruffian on the bed had merely kicked her out of his life. And to Hal, sitting there on the running-board with the unlighted cigarette between his fingers, somehow none of it seemed to matter any longer. Not what had happened, but what was to happen, was the important thing. Only portions of what Clarry was saying reached him.

'— her I'd treated like the Adam's-apple of my eye. I hadn't had time to glance at the papers. I'd been doing her marketing for her up the World's End Passage. I'd bought her ma some toffee. I'd gone to the counter for two glasses of port to give her a bit of colour. The worry and thought I haven't had over that girl! And when I looked round there she was in a fainting condition, as you may suppose, her just having read it ——'

Poor dark-eyed girl, Halsey thought, to have had it so cruelly brought home to her — poor old Percy, whose death had given Halsey a Bettine who drew his head down to her breast and comforted it ——

'— Cells they call them, and they have ramblifications all over the country. That Bella Griggs is one of them, and Parratt that wants to be a Member of Parliament. Member of Guy Fawkes more like, and McGovern, and old Beezlebub Cossar — the judgment of women in affairs of state is the same as their judgment in everything else ——'

And that other, about her being tired of him, was all a nightmare, that would come right presently, and B.-J.

had said it was positively her last trip, and he had been decent enough in the end to arrange that Hal should take it with her ——

'— they're made different,' Clarry was earnestly urging. 'It's like as if their minds was affected by their bodies. I been into the figures of it. In buses and walking along the streets. There's three, and then one all loopy and in her tantrums. They ain't rectilinear like us. It works out at a depreciation of between fifteen and twenty per cent — not to speak of the way they twist up a man's system, guv'nor ——' The street-arab's eyes were brightly watching Hal's face.

They twisted up a man's system. This little sweep curled up in his lair, with his torch and his 'Outlines of Company Law,' was right there. They could twist it up to as much bliss as could be borne or down to as much despair as a man might go on living under. And the eighteenth was drawing near, when Hal would see which it was to be.

CHAPTER VII

I

'IN THAT case, Vibart,' Mr. Claude said, 'I can only say we're exceedingly sorry to lose you.'

'There'll be time enough for me to show Cuthbertson round and tell him all he wants to know,' Hal replied.

'I confess I cannot understand it,' Mr. Claude complained. 'Up to a short time ago we were getting on so capitally together. Germany, too — a country at the moment in a state of complete political disorganization — economic chaos — I hear, for example, that their railway system ——'

'I'm not going by train. I'm flying.'

At this Mr. Claude looked still more mistrustfully over his glasses. 'I'm speaking to you as an older man, Vibart. With all its risks?'

'It isn't any riskier now than it was a year or two ago.'

'I don't mean the actual risks of flying. You've really no idea of the advice I'm trying to give you?'

'None,' said Hal, who thought he could make a pretty good guess.

'Youth is often impetuous — hot-headed. Judgment and experience only come with the years. There are such things as political risks.'

'I've nothing to do with politics and never have had. This is purely private and personal business.'

'You're staying at the Maximilian Hotel, aren't you?'

'Yes,' said Hal, and at something in his tone Mr. Claude gave a light sigh.

'Well, I'm very sorry for it all, but you quite see that at this, our very busiest time of the year ——'

'I'll start with Cuthbertson this morning if you like.'

'Very well.'

Mr. Claude had only one other request to make. This was that the packing-cases lying about the yard made things a little awkward for the vans coming in and out, and if they could be moved back to their proper places in the shed ——

In fact, the whole business struck Hal as quite a neat example of the sack without tears. He left Mr. Claude's office and walked across the yard.

'How long will you be?' he asked Clarry.

Clarry was there, not as one who had lain there all night as snug as a bug in a rug, rising at half-past five in the morning to conceal every vestige of his occupancy, but as Mr. Halsey Vibart's personal mechanic, busy with Mobiloil and grease-gun and rag, getting the car ready for the road. His sleeves were rolled up to his armpits, and about his middle he had passed an old apron to protect the brown mixture trousers. He looked up from his adjusting of the carburetor.

'Ten minutes. I've been all over her, wheel-nuts and tyres and all the lot. The turn you gave me when I heard you wheeling her in reminded me like. That's where people get copped, getting careless and letting things slide.'

'I'm afraid here's where you get copped, too,' Halsey told him. 'They want all this furniture cleared out at once and the other stuff put back. It would have been easier to warehouse it, as I wanted.'

Clarry flooded the carburetor, closed the bonnet, and began to polish the radiator.

'What about the car?' he asked dully by and by.

'Find a cheap garage somewhere. Has Mr. Cuthbertson been here asking for me?'

'Who's he?'

'The man who's got my job.'

'No.'

Clarry went on polishing. Presently, looking up, he said, 'Has he really got it, boss?'

'Yes. I've just resigned. Why are you looking like that?'

Furniture, car, his guv'nor's job, his guv'nor himself, all gone — that was what Halsey read on Clarry's face. He thought for a moment; then he gave an amused little twinkle.

'By the way, does that book of yours say anything about wills?' he asked.

'Wills's Gold Flake?' Clarry asked spiritlessly.

'No. Wills that people make, if anything happens to them.'

'Don't talk like that, guv'nor,' said Clarry.

'You don't die any sooner for making a will. What I was going to say — here's Mr. Cuthbertson for your witness — I make you a present of this lot if anything happens to me. Only in case, that is. I don't suppose anybody else will want it.'

He knew by this time what a tricky, unscrupulous little scrounger the lad was, but he was hardly prepared for what followed. Clarry went on polishing for a minute or so. Then he looked up. His mouth was drawn and trembling. His brown eyes were wet. He made a movement as if to pass the back of his hand across his nose, but used the polishing-rag instead. He gulped down the smell of Brasso.

'Don't you go leaving me no furniture,' he said, with a little sob. 'If anything was to happen to you, I shouldn't want no furniture. A pair o' boots'ld do for me till I found all the furniture *I* wanted!'

And 'Sorry,' said Hal. 'I only meant it as a joke.'

He supposed he might look forward to having this youngster on his hands for the rest of his life now, but that look across the radiator was at least something to have won from a naughty world.

Cuthbertson, to whom he was handing over, was a gaunt, lean-jawed fellow considerably older than Hal. He called himself an Australian, but actually had been knocking about half the back-blocks of the world for getting on for thirty years, and had seen a good deal of life, mostly with the lid off. From a shaggy fur pouch he produced every known tobacco in turn, and smoked it in a pipe so evil with nicotine that it drove Hal headlong back to his cigarettes, from which habit he never thereafter departed. As they bowled along the Henley Fair Mile that morning and took the road to Stonor Park and Christmas Common, Hal expected Cuthbertson, after his wanderings over waste and wave, to have at least a word for the English hills and hedges, the ordered cultivation, the beech woods with the sun on them, the deer-dotted glades of the park. But places were places to Cuthbertson, and he had seen them. What he wanted was first that hell's-flue of his pipe, then to get the hang of his new job, and after that to add to the store of chaotic reading he had evidently got through from time to time.

'No, it isn't because I could spit across your Home Counties,' he said, the thick brew of his pipe bubbling like lava in a miniature crater. 'Atlases don't interest me any more. It's the iron-filings and the magnet they move about underneath.'

'What iron-filings?' Hal asked, toying with the wheel.

'You did it at school, I expect. Iron-filings on a piece of paper and you chase them about with a magnet underneath. Spill 'em on a map instead, like they did on the Continent, and then watch them mob the frontiers and boundaries. I want to know who works the magnet.'

'H'm!' said Hal. 'Speaking as a mere filing ——'

'All these Reds and Whites and Greens and Communists and Separatists and Bolshevists. Who's doing it? Who's doing it wherever you go? There's India; I was a policeman there. There's South Africa; I was a farmer there, and an overhead-linesman, and a farmer again, and a schoolmaster in Kimberley, and a few other things. There's Japan; I've driven a locomotive in Japan. And China and South America and the States. It's everywhere you go, millions and millions of human iron-filings, and somebody playing about with a magnet you don't see.'

'Politics are a bit out of my line,' Hal replied, and Cuthbertson gave him a quick look.

'Is that so? I heard a whisper it was the other way.'

Hal returned the look. 'A whisper from somebody in the firm?'

'Between ourselves.'

'The manager at Willesden?'

'We won't mention any names.'

'I see,' said Hal. Only the Willesden manager could have said anything to Mr. Claude about the Maximilian Hotel. He had only just resigned in time.

He had turned the car through a gap onto a wide upland heath in Oxfordshire, from which, across the

Berkshire Downs and the whole breadth of Wiltshire, the far-off hills of Gloucestershire could be seen. On clear days he always pulled up at that point to look. Parkinsons' sold ploughs and reapers and drills and harrows for all that, and that morning Hal was going to introduce Cuthbertson to a farmer called Jackson. By and by (in a manner of speaking) Cuthbertson would sell Jackson a plough — not a sword, to turn him into an iron-filing, but a plough to draw a furrow in the earth with, and a harrow after that, and a drill to drill in the seed, and a reaper to reap the corn. Over in France they were growing their corn again already, picking out the rusty iron from ground that had been fertilized at a greater cost than anywhere else in the world. And in a few days Hal would be almost near enough to look down on it for a moment in passing. There beneath him would be the newly swept channel, and the inundated lands, the Mole, and only a little way off that costly corn. Hardly out of sight would be the regions where the filings were still massed, the occupied areas, the bridgeheads, and civil tumults beyond. Another flying-hour or two would raise new states, Czecho-Slovakia pushed out almost to where Elbe cuts Dresden in two, Jugo-Slavia invisible over the horizon, Poland and the Corridor and the Free Ports to the north. And here he sat at the wheel of the stationary car, looking out over the immense sunny English theatre of old battles and ever-new corn, past Roman Sinodun with its twin Clumps where Thames and Thame met, past Dorchester with its church that was once the chiefest of Mercia and Wessex, past Abingdon, away to Lechlade and the old grassy canal that joins an infant Thames to a lordly Severn striding like a strong man to the sea. He did not know when he would see it again, so he had better say good-bye to it now. It wasn't likely he would see much of Cuthbertson either after he had handed over. He wished the Australian well with his filings and magnets and maps. He thought he had seen the ends of the earth, but he might find something to open his eyes even in London and the Home Counties, especially if he went about asking questions such as he asked. There was calm on the surface, but vast things had crumbled down, and nothing was now too small to come for a significant moment to the top before being engulfed again. There was no time to begin to tell the Australian about these things. Let him sell his ploughs and learn them for himself. Halsey touched the starting-button, and the engine leaped to life.

'Well, what about pushing along to see Jackson?'

'Right.'

He turned the Morris into the road again, and the plain became a glimpse of fading milky blue, lost through beech and bracken.

'*Pech. Was wirst Du jetzt machen?*'

'Wait and see, I suppose.'

'*Wenigstens zehn bob* — he's cleaned me right out again ——'

'Yes, for Heaven's sake, speak English. German reminds me of those beastly air-raids when you couldn't. Here's ten bob. But it's for yourself, not for him.'

Bettine handed the note to Miss Lili Braun, and leaned back, fingering Audrey's string of large amber beads which she had placed round her neck.

Stick the compasses into the map at the point where Halsey had drawn up his car, and the place was only as far away as Lechlade, but in the opposite direction. It was not the Coal Hole in the Strand, but it was no very great distance away. A basement had been converted into a dimly lighted café, where sandwiches and light refreshments could be had, and perhaps a liqueur could be got from across the street during the permitted hours. Midday reigned over Halsey's sunny plain, but down here it might have been either day or night. Small rectangular lanterns with red-and-yellow panes hung from the low beams, and the sham black panelling was broken at intervals into alcoves without any lighting at all, big enough for two, with brass trays from Birmingham and leather cushions from Czecho-Slovakia, recesses for quiet talk. At that hour of the day Miss Lili Braun was usually in bed, resting after her performance of the night before, but one rises early when one wishes to borrow ten bob from an old pal.

'*Gott, etwas zurücklegen!*' Miss Braun sighed, putting the note into her bag. 'What's this job of yours all about, and why is it crashing?'

'Oh, translation and so on,' Bettine replied absently, fingering Audrey's beads. 'What are jobs for but to crash?'

'Who's the boy you were at the show with that night?'

'He's the cousin of the girl I'm living with — when she comes back, that is.'

'Nice?'

'Oh' — the blue eyes under the red-and-yellow lamp gazed into the empty alcove opposite — 'so. She's in Rome. He comes in to see me sometimes.'

'Oh!'

Bettine gave the beads a little shake. 'No. Nor anybody else. I've seen enough of you and your Ferdy and Emmie and her Otto, thank you.'

'Ferdy said he was a bit ——'

'A bit what?'

'English — standoffish — you know ——'

Bettine pursed the flower of her mouth. Then, 'Do you remember that rotten show we saw that time you and Ferdy were in the Marktgasse?' she asked. 'The one with the comic hero.' And in German, with a mocking lifting of her chin, she mimicked, '"Shall I sully the flower I intend to wear before the world?"'

'He's like that, is he?'

'Oh' — Bettine seemed a little sorry she had said it — 'he's quite nice really ——'

'What's the girl you're living with like?'

Bettine answered petulantly. 'Mildly off her head at present, I should say. She's an artist. I think she's got a crush on some Italian officer or other because he wears a long red cloak. If it isn't him it's his horse, or how he sleeps with her hand in plaster under his pillow, *if* he does, and walks in the moonlight in Italy "with Castor and Pollux looking down on their own temples"' — the flower-mouth quoted from Audrey's letter.

'Fond of her, are you?'

'I stopped being too fond of people a long time ago.'

'You are, though.'

'Just at present I hate her.' She gave the beads an angry rattle.

'I'm having to watch Ferdy and Greta Horn, too,' the girl who wouldn't be pretty very much longer mused.

'Don't know her.'

'Not know her! Greta! Why, have you forgotten the time Lewisohn let the whole crowd down in Dresden, and we hadn't a pfennig amongst us, and old Mutter Unkel gave us a spread in the garden, and the painted wooden toadstool and that fellow sitting on it and playing the zither and singing songs about us? The fair girl who got so tight and couldn't find her way to the *toilette* ——'

'I don't remember,' said Bettine, slowly telling the beads.

'Well, perhaps you weren't there, but I thought you were. Shall you look out for a job in Berlin?'

'I don't know yet what I shall do in Berlin.'

'Well, you always did fall on your feet. Two pounds a week and no rent to pay and always somebody to take you out to meals isn't too bad. I wish I could make a bit in the mornings. Do you know any more artists? What do they pay their models here?'

'I don't know. I always sat to her for nothing.'

'At the *Nachtlokale* you give them no more than a dance —— ' Miss Braun mused.

'I'm sick of every night club in London,' Bettine retorted. 'I wish I was old. I wish I was grey. I wish my eyes were another colour. I'd get married only I should be too sorry for the man who married me. Yes, of course he wants me to. But the English are always so afraid of their own insides.'

'It is a bore sometimes having to pretend you don't know any more than you did the day you were born,' Miss Braun agreed.

'And at my last digs there was a stupid text on the wall, "God is Love." I took it down. If anything would drive me to a short life and a gay one, that would. *And* the church bells round the corner on Sunday mornings, *and* my landlady peeping round the corner of the blind every time I came home late in a taxi. I suppose Herrmann doesn't want another secretary by any chance?'

'You know the kind of secretary Herrmann wants.'

'Well, I've sometimes thought I'd rather be like you and Ferdy than marry a man, even if he does sponge on you. Life's rotten, anyway.'

'Ferdy's all right as long as I haven't to smack Greta Horn's face with a hairbrush,' said Lili.

'I wish I'd a car. I'd just drive off somewhere into the country for the rest of the day all by myself.'

'You'll be all right in Berlin. I hear it's ever so gay. The first thing they did was to get the Tiller Girls back. Are you going to be by yourself?'

'No. He's coming with me.'

'*He?*' Miss Braun opened her eyes wide. 'The English boy? The cousin? Do you mean that just you two ——'

'Yes.'

'And he wants to marry you?'

'Dying to.'

'And you won't have him?'

'No.'

'You mean to say you'll let him take you about to places, and give you a good time, and you'll say good-night to him at your bedroom door, and that'll be all?'

'I didn't ask him to come.'

'Aren't you a bit frightened? Or aren't you telling the truth?'

Bettine let the beads fall. 'I wish I was frightened. I think it would do me good if somebody were to tear me into bits and pieces and leave me all black and blue.'

'Suppose you've made a mistake and he did?'

'I don't know what would happen then. I suppose I should either kill him or else not turn a hair.'

'What does he think about it?'

'I haven't seen him. I shan't till we start. Oh, how I wish I had a car this afternoon! As I haven't, shall we send out for a couple of liqueurs?'

Miss Lili Braun leaned back to look at her friend. Bettine sat with her small feet crossed on the lower rung of the brass-topped table, her eyes on the empty alcove opposite, again telling the amber beads, with a newly awakened memory for each: Click, the wooden hero who had uttered the sentiment that time when Lili and Ferdy had been living together in the Marktgasse; click, the stranded company in Dresden and the zither-player on the painted wooden toadstool and Greta Horn who had got so tight; click, the poster-hung office of the producer in Brussels; click, Herrmann, who wanted the double-duty secretaries. Click, click, click, dressing-rooms, stone and brick corridors, rehearsals, hare's-foot and powder, wet-white, the pennies they screwed into the tights (but Lili was dancing in bare legs now), the stage-doors, the street-clothes, and succession of jobs after that, the boss's private office, the typing, the clerking, Papa and the Russian lessons, Raffaeles', the lodgings, the God Who was always Love ——

Miss Lili Braun gave a short laugh.

'Well, if that's all, you can have it and I'll have my Ferdy,' she said. 'And I've a rehearsal at two. Did I hear you say something about liqueurs?'

Suppose that that same day Bettine's ears had burned because somebody was talking about her. The person who was talking about Bettine had never set eyes on her. As the canaries and white mice of the sapheads are to the Generalissimo, so was her life to his. Nor does it matter in what room, of what building, or whereabouts in London the conversation took place. B.-J. was receiving his instructions, and it was the person who gave them who was talking about Bettine.

'Well, we'll take it she's all you say. What about the other — Vibart did you say his name was?'

'He neither knows nor wants to know.'

'Has he any suspicions?'

'Of what it is? Not the faintest.'

'Vigilance? Courage?'

'I think I can answer for him.'

'Brains?'

'More than enough for this.'

'Then why isn't he one of us?'

'He is. I saw to that. But he thinks he isn't,' the Goblin replied.

'H'm. Now as regards the — particular article. Who's actually putting pen to paper as you might say?'

'I am.'

'You've experimented?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And it works?'

'With care, perfectly.'

'She speaks German?'

'As well as she speaks English.'

'Does he?'

'Not a word.'

'All the better. What about the arrangements at the other end?'

'The only thing not arranged for is the weather, and I don't think we need worry about that.'

'The weather mustn't be allowed to stand in the way. It's hail, rain, or snow.'

'Quite.'

'Now, just in case of an accident to the original. Could you repeat it word for word?'

The Goblin did so, word for word, and the great man looked at him with interest.

'I wish I'd been born with that gift of yours, Bigsworth-James. There were times when it would have been useful.'

'I can well believe it, sir.'

'What about money?'

'I thought you'd probably sanction it if I bought her a few things out of Imprest, a couple of frocks or so, and I think she ought to have fifty pounds for herself. The rest goes down to Headquarters account. I have the orders here for you to sign.'

There was an interval during which the personage scrutinised the orders. He found them correct, and became chatty.

'You been doing much parachute-work lately, Bigsworth-James?'

'I'm afraid that's all over for me, sir.'

'Have you still got your mentioned-in-despatches — those war-pigeons?'

'I think they've earned a rest, too. One's quite blind.'

'By the way, what did your friend Vibart do?'

'He came over from British Columbia to join up.' The Goblin reeled off Halsey's war-record with a completeness and accuracy that would have astonished Hal.

'Where does the Customs examination take place?'

'At Hanover, and seeing how little there is to declare ——' B.-J. smiled.

B.-J.'s Chief permitted himself a smile, too, and took up a pen; but as it was not the gold pen that signed the Treaty of Versailles, its photograph never got into the papers, nor are all the writer's activities to be found in the column-and-a-half devoted to his fame in 'Who's Who.' He shook hands with B.-J. It might be months before B.-J. saw him face to face again. Then he rose. He was going on to help Cousin Ben to change his mind again.

Still on that same afternoon when Halsey Vibart was posting about Oxfordshire putting his successor into the way of his new job, and Bettine Frühling sat in a dark sheeted theatre watching her friend's rehearsal on the stage, and Cyril Valentine Bigsworth-James walked first into a bank to cash a draft and then up the Haymarket and into the Airports Office, Lottie Smith again stood at the revolving washers, with Freda Horrocks in charge of the other two. Again the cut-off sleeves clung like another skin to her rounded and dead-white upper arms, again her dark hair was wet with steam about her temples. The Lillie Laundry was shot through with sunshine. From the glazing of the roof it fell in shafts across the long calenders and made rhomboids and lozenges on the white clothes on the ironing-table. Perhaps it shone a little in Lottie's heart, too, for she was singing softly and dutifully to herself. It was Freda who was in a bad temper. Something or other had happened about her Alf.

'If that's the way he thinks he can go on, he'll very soon find his mistake out,' she was scolding, her pretty pert face flushed above the armful of clothes she was carrying, her short legs stumbling in the trailing garments. 'Him and his Working-Men's Club! If it takes up all his time to be an assistant secretary or whatever he calls himself, he'd better be looking out for somebody else!'

'I wish you'd come to the Lord Jesus, Freda,' said Lottie softly; for 'A *Sa*-viour, a *Sa*-viour, a *Sa*-viour!' the tubs now knocked out, three times this way, three times that.

'I wasn't talking about the Lord Jesus; I was talking about him keeping me waiting,' Freda snapped.

'Jesus is always waiting,' said Lottie patiently.

'Two nights running, half an hour both times, and he says it's the secretary work. I don't believe in clubs. If people have got homes, they don't want clubs, and if they haven't, they ought to do something about it.'

'There's a home above, Freda.'

'Not my sort of home for a bit yet,' Freda retorted, thrusting in the clothes and restarting the machine. 'If one doesn't suit there's others, without bothering Jesus.'

'Jesus is never bothered. He rejoices in it. Come unto Me, He said.'

'It isn't Sunday yet. He wouldn't have said it if that little rotter Clarry Moss hadn't let you down. A little rotter he is, and my Alf isn't much better, and I'm going to tell him so.'

Lottie's lips quivered. She saw again, through closing eyes, an implacable Clarry, who had thrust her into a taxi on the Embankment, and thrown the driver his fare, and had marched off without as much as a good-night. She had not seen him since, and she knew he would never meet her at the laundry gates again. He had twenty pounds, and the wages of sin was death; but the gift of God is eternal life, and she hadn't to take that dead man's clothes in her hands, after all, muddy and dripping and with weeds and slime in their pockets, and to wash them and her sins away at the same time, because 'A *Sa*-viour, a *Sa*-viour, a *Sa*-viour!' the washers sang as if they had been an organ in a church, and the clothes endlessly following one another into the drying-closet down the room were not the doomed going into the portals of the bad place, but white-robed and pardoned souls entering into their rest. Clarry would never forgive her, but she must forgive Clarry. And she must bring Freda to Jesus, too, for it would be awful to think of herself going to one place and Freda to the other.

'I wish you'd come to the parish hall to-night,' she said.

'Not for me, thanks. That Alf of mine's got a bit of ticking-off to go through.'

'Where are you meeting him?' Lottie asked.

'Outside the Town Hall. And if you like I'll tell him to bring somebody next time for you. There's no harm in having a look. You needn't have him if you don't like him. Mark my words, if you get this parish-hall habit, you'll be an old maid before you know where you are. I'm worried about *you*, Lottie Smith, coming over like this. You and him seemed to be getting on all right. He was just coming up to the scratch, *I* thought. What was it all about?'

Lottie did not answer.

'You needn't tell me there wasn't something,' said Freda, with conviction, and Lottie hung her head.

No. There had been something. There had been a very wicked thing, indeed. But she couldn't tell Freda what it was. Cast thy burden, but not on Freda.

Slowly and tremulously Lottie began to sing again.

II

The Big Four up the river are not the only ones who get on with their work While London Sleeps and darkness covers the land. Over in Threadneedle Street the Old Lady knits through the night, thinking of her gold for ever on the move, tossed in ships, rushed across continents in guarded trains, earning as the land earns after the farmer has gone to bed, holding up the credits of the world. The vessels down the river are not asleep; they are only waiting for the tide. In and out of the ring of throats that surrounds London, the trains do not stop running, and if the furnaces of Sheffield and the Hartlepools and the Clyde were allowed to go out, trouble would follow. There is also another Big Four that does not shut an eye. It is at Scotland Yard.

And all come to Ben wanting different things of him. The furnaces growl because of taxation, but Ben tells them that unless debts are paid first, the Old Lady will have no knitting to do. The railways, busy with their grouping, are jealous of every other wheel that moves. The farmer wants to sell his corn, but the ships want corn from somewhere else that they may have the carrying of it. And one wants this and another that and the public services everything. It has become more than a one-Ben job, and Ben thanks God that, at any rate, his people are English and quiet and very dependable.

So, with the Four of Scotland Yard awake less than half a mile away, what was Halsey Vibart doing with that service revolver in his hand? One would have thought that already there had been a revolver too many in the Maximilian Hotel. At any rate, it was his last night there, and he was packing his bag. What weight of luggage had B.-J. said was allowed free?

Thirty pounds? He weighed the revolver in his hand.

To-morrow he was off. On the last occasion when he had left England's shores, few men had done so unarmed, but if Halsey were now to use that weapon in his hand on a man, it would be murder and they would hang him for it. There hadn't been any talk of hanging then, except by a few fools who had ranted about hanging the Kaiser — and the King of the Belgians and the King of Italy and King George, too, he supposed if things had gone the other way. Really government was rather marvellous if it could open the throttle full out one minute like that and pull a fellow up on the ten-mile limit the next! The only assumption possible was that people were fools. And what about that poor devil in the Black-and-Tans, apparently just as dead whether the killing had been glorious or merely best not inquired too closely into? Hal had not heard another word about that business. The hall-porter, whom he had asked, had not been communicative. He had given Hal a look as much as to say that the best thing for him was never to know anything about anything at all.... But he had better not pack that revolver among his shirts and collars. Revolvers had gone out of fashion. Things were suddenly not done that way any longer. They struck people down by hidden processes instead. Gallant fellow, who had taken a top trench in Bedford Row single-handed with only the Inhabited House Duty for a weapon! Noble soul, honourably mentioned in Parkinsons' despatches for having informed Mr. Claude that one of his employees had incurred political hostilities and might be better off the pay-list! The war had been more decent in a way. For all that, Hal stowed the revolver away in one of the bags he was leaving behind him.

He had asked B.-J. as few questions as possible. There was probably a hidden process in it that the journey was to be made by air, but about this Hal was completely indifferent. He had merely put the tickets into his pocket and wanted to know what about Bettine. He was told that he would find her in the main hall at Croydon a quarter of an hour before the time the plane was due to start. It seemed a month since he had seen her; actually it was nine days. He wondered what she was doing at that moment, whether she was excited, apprehensive, what. He took the tickets from his pocket and looked at them again. 'Von LONDON nach BERLIN: K. Nr. 03664,' and again, 'Von LONDON nach BERLIN,' the serial number next consecutively following. Those slim blue papers would enable him to have his lunch in the Haymarket to-morrow and to dine at nine more than half a thousand miles away, and even out of that, three hours would be spent on the ground. Again he couldn't help wondering, why by air? If to keep an appointment, why not take train and boat and start a day earlier? He didn't suppose she was going to drop anything on Berlin. To save time? Was that essential for some reason? Anyway, it was none of his business. His business would be to keep his eyes on every person who approached her, to note what they did, and if necessary to see that they didn't. He tried the weight of his bag. He didn't think it was overweight, but there was a weighing-machine downstairs, and he would take it down and weigh it. The labels were on the washstand already written out; his passport and the tickets were in his pocket. The bags he was leaving behind were strapped and locked, and the porter would fetch them down. Brushes, razor, and pyjamas he would need for the night, but he could reopen the bag in the morning.

Otherwise he was ready. He picked up the bag and carried it downstairs to weigh it.

A couple of miles farther west, Bettine, too, had already packed and was preparing to go to bed. She was doing so unusually early, for it was only a little after half-past nine, and Bettine frequently went to bed so late that she got up in the afternoon, bathed, dressed, and greeted the day in all her morning freshness at getting on towards tea-time. But to-night was different. She would only have six hours' sleep in any case, and there was all the strain and physical tension of to-morrow to come. If she wasn't sleepy, she must count sheep or something. And it would be necessary for her to have her bath to-night, too.

She went into Audrey's bedroom and stood looking at the things that she, too, would pop into her bag at the last minute, her brushes, her nail-file, two little bottles with paper labels on them numbered '1' and '2,' a bulbed spray. The room was on the street level, with net curtains to shut out the street in the daytime and heavier ones to draw when the light was switched on inside. In a few days would be the longest day; it could hardly yet be called dark, and she was going to bed. She drew the inner curtains, turned on the light, and, going into the bathroom, set the hot water running. Then she returned to Audrey's dressing-table again. The glass had hinged wings to show her her profile, but she took up a hand-glass. With her back to the table and the thin blue dressing-gown half off her shoulders, she stood for some moments looking at herself. Then she walked into the studio.

Audrey would be home again before Bettine got back from Germany; would she still want Bettine to go on living with her? Or would it have to be the lodgings again? Did she want to go on living with Audrey? (But to begin thinking of Audrey was not the best way to get to sleep.) What was she going to do when her job with B.-J. fell through? Her Russian could never take her to Russia; she had been seen about far too much with Papa, and to find herself in the Loubianka would be carrying the black-and-blue business altogether too far. Suddenly she wondered why she had told Lili that. Was it true? Perhaps it was, if this young cousin of Audrey's had only known it. But people couldn't make themselves fall in love. It had been his business to find the way to her, and he hadn't done so, and there was an end of it. She had no doubt he would take good enough care of her tomorrow. And now she really must have her bath and go to bed.

But still she lingered. The place was so full of memories, of Audrey painting, Audrey reading in the Fauche-Borel book about the blue-eyed Nymph who had disguised herself as a boy, Audrey stalking dramatically about talking and eating her lunch at the same time, Audrey on the sofa with secrets to tell. Her fingers picked up the doll. Mood after mood had gone to the dressing of it, so that now it seemed almost a bit of Bettine herself. Its bare legs, brown as if it had played on the sands, were hidden in the guileful snake-hued folds. She had made up its face into a mere expressionless mask. Her own face mimicked its expressionlessness for a moment. Then she thrust out her lips naughtily at it. Who cared, anyway? And the bath would be running over. She threw the doll aside and went into the bathroom.

But, coming out again, her bath over, she still did not get into bed. She sat on the edge of it, as if waiting, as Lili sometimes waited for her Ferdy, and Ferdy off with Greta Horn somewhere. Her thoughts, that she ought to have been hushing to sleep, became wider awake every moment. What a waster Ferdy was, following Lili about on tour, sitting in the husbands' row of the stalls, having drinks at the bar, talking to the other wasters about Lili's art, and she dancing her youth and looks away for him! And for some extraordinary reason, that Bettine half envied her, she stuck to him. Suppose God should turn out to be Love, after all? Could everybody be wrong about it? Or was it merely one of these things people said to save thinking? But it didn't matter. Audrey's cousin had not known the way. She could almost have hated him for it. Might he still find it at the last moment? Or would he go on being nothing but nice, quite clean, persistent and obtuse?... Ah, that was a good sign; she was yawning. With all to-morrow in front of her, she mustn't let the tiredness wear off. She switched off her light and got into bed.

But as if to spite her and wear her down before she started, that quietest street between Kensington and Chelsea awoke that night to a hundred unaccustomed noises. A couple of cats began it, and then a party of revellers chose to straggle that way home, singing loudly as they went. Hardly had their voices ceased to sound when a taxi drew up a few doors away, and an altercation broke out between a man, a woman, and the driver. The cats stopped their wrangling to listen, and then began again. With a loudness Bettine had never noticed before, a neighbouring church clock struck twelve. And she had to be up at four.

Thenceforward she tossed, hopelessly past her sleep now. At half-past two the birds began their peep-o'-day chorus, and then she really must have dozed for a bit, for the next thing she was aware of was their full song. Over the edge of Asia the sun came up. He lighted the Caspian and the Black Sea, the Austrian mountains and the new frontiers and the waking European Plain. Across the North Sea he strode, and gilded the eastward face of Cousin Ben. And at the same moment, in that little street between Kensington and Chelsea, he showed the squat and secret figure of B.-J., stopping before Bettine's street-level bedroom window and tapping lightly on it three or four times with the edge of a penny.

III

The aeroplane shed its shadow as a tree sheds a leaf, banked heavily, and all beneath became a carpet dragged bodily away by invisible hands. Flattening out presently in the stiff following wind, it began to encounter pocket after pocket, bump after bump, and Hal, dismayed, could only hope that matters would improve by and by.

For he had not expected her to show signs of air-sickness almost before they were clear of the ground. In the central hall she had given him a muttered 'Hallo, good-morning'; side by side and in silence they had walked across the flying-field to where the plane waited, a porter carrying their bags after them; and no sooner had she got into her seat than she had plugged her ears and closed her eyes. He had asked her whether she was sure she had her passport; she had moistened her lips nervously and nodded, but she had made a grimace at the sight of his flask, and he had put it back into his pocket again. Now she had dragged off her hat and was huddled up in her new brown travelling-costume, her head almost touching her knees. Her nape was all he could see of her, with a light scarf floating wispily and uselessly inches away from it. The flowers and chocolates he had bought her lay on the floor at her feet.

There was only one other passenger to be a possible source of danger to Bettine, and Halsey dismissed him from the case at once. He was merely a middle-aged man of the business type, much more likely to share Mr. Claude Parkinson's views on private political errands than to be taking any notice of Bettine and himself. He had put on a cap to travel in, and, with the back of his head against the spring headpiece of his seat, looked as if he was in a barber's chair waiting to be shaved, with the 'Times' in his hand for his towel. The seats on Halsey's side were an empty row. Through an aperture he could see the wireless operator's telephoned head, the mildly glowing valves above it, his right hand that tapped the key, his other hand that opened a little hatch from time to time and passed a note forward to the unseen pilot. The needle of the altimeter trembled about the six hundred metres, and the neat parcelled county of Kent was slipping away below.

Hal had bought papers, but there was plenty of time to read them yet. Instead he rose, put his arm across the gangway, and tried to arrange Bettine's scarf more comfortably for her. But she gave a little start and a shiver. The man with the 'Times' turned his head and lifted an inquiring eyebrow, Halsey gave a little nod, as much as to agree that perhaps she was best left alone. He picked up the flowers and chocolates. Perhaps the wind would drop. He wished that night or Berlin would come.

But the first alighting was at Amsterdam, and, settling himself again, he got out the guide-book and opened it at the maps. Yes, that was the route — the Channel at Folkestone, then Calais, over the Belgian Coast, across the lowlands of the Scheldt, and then due north. He glanced across at Bettine's poor afflicted little nape again. He had hoped that some at least of the trip might be novel and full of fun. He had imagined himself and Bettine making mouths at one another as they tried to make themselves heard above the roar of the engines, and laughing and shaking their heads at their failure. As he watched, she made a little settling movement. Good, she was going to sleep. Perhaps it would have passed off when she woke. He opened the guide-book again and turned to Berlin.

Berlin, the second largest city of Europe, the third in the world. Only London and New York bigger, both of which he had seen. And what was this the book said? Except for its Schloss, a few buildings clustered about it, and a sprinkle of fishermen's cottages, only a little over forty years old? You look at these things rather more attentively when you are on your way to a place for the first time. Why, Percy must have remembered a time when there was no Berlin. Earl's Court had been already built and some of it breaking down into shabbiness again while Berlin was still an empty plain with a river winding through it. He unfolded the index-plan of this infant giant. There it was, as if a stone had been dropped into water, first its old walls, then its Stadtbahn, then its Ringbahn, its Inner and Outer Circles, ring on ring, suburb on suburb, a layer a year as spruce puts on its wood, and half of it while Halsey himself had been outgrowing his clothes at Eton. The world had made for itself its third largest agglomeration of human beings in as short a time as that.

And now the forty-years-old Empire of which it was the capital was broken in pieces again. He thought of Cuthbertson, and got up to look out of the window. The roofs of Folkestone were crawling forward, and after them the Channel waited. A slightly altered light filled the cabin; they were climbing through thin sunny cloud. The gauge stood at twelve hundred metres, and the wireless operator was passing forward another note.

And broken how? Not as the lands he would presently be seeing had been broken. Towns and villages were not lying in heaps of dust there, they hadn't to pick the old iron out of the ground before that costly corn could be grown. German was intact. Then how was she broken? Under the menace that her towns should be laid flat, too? Hardly likely. The conqueror would not have stopped at that if he had thought it would pay him. He had only not done it because he hadn't dared to do it. Already the filings had been getting stronger than the magnet, and the ruin would have involved himself, too. So he had taken the other way, the broad daylight way of the Treaty, with all its midnight of secrets behind. Hal was drawing nearer to that intact yet shattered land every moment. The plane was over the Channel, with the tiny ships far below like specks on watered silk; the plane losing height again; that was Calais ahead. He looked at his watch. The intervals between town and town would be countable in minutes soon: Dunkirk, a few minutes, Ostend, ten minutes more, and then Zeebrugge with its stone finger three kilometres long. Carpenter and the blockships; the coast over which a curtain of such impenetrable mystery had been dropped was only a very small place really. Soon it would no longer be Belgium, but Holland, with bulbs for bombs, a land of canals and gardens and miles of grey glinting glass, the very place for Cuthbertson to turn his swords into ploughshares. Anyway, they would soon be over Holland, and Holland meant Amsterdam and an hour's respite for Bettine's poor tossed little body, and a smoke for himself.

The wireless operator continued to tap, the engines to roar, and the aeroplane to bear due north, with the neutral country flowing like a receding tide under the outspread wings.

He touched her lightly on the shoulder. She did not even seem to have noticed the sudden silence. The aeroplane was part of the solid earth's belongings again weighing restfully down on it with its tons of dead weight and the shutting-off of its power. They were in a wide field in the middle of an illimitable flat country. Dotted about were other aeroplanes just arrived or making ready to depart, and the vanes, and the pumps, and the beacons for day and night, and the long rows of hangars and the white buildings of concrete and glass of the Airport's offices.

'We're here,' he said. 'Amsterdam.'

'All right,' she muttered, without opening her eyes.

'But you'll want something to eat.'

'I don't want anything.'

'But you must have something, dearest. You won't get anything else till nine to-night.'

'Do let me alone. I don't want anything,' she moaned.

'Then I shall go and fetch you something here.'

But it was not permitted. The plane had to be cleared, and already an attendant was bringing the ladder. Listlessly she roused herself. She moved as if it would have been far less trouble to be dead. He stood at the foot of the ladder to receive her. But she made an almost angry little movement with her hand. She got down the ladder shakily but unassisted, and again, as he had done in Windsor Great Park, he watched the little round knees knocking against the new brown costume as they crossed the landing-ground towards the aerodrome-buildings and the restaurant and food.

He placed her at a table before a vast square window that looked out over the concrete and grass and the planes at rest and the coming and going of the aerodrome. But she got up again and walked quickly out. He half rose, but sat down again, with his eyes on the door by which she had disappeared. If she wasn't back in five minutes, he would go to look for her; in the mean time he found himself baffled by a menu in Dutch. The waiter behind him was trying him with German, but he knew no more German than he did Dutch. But suddenly the waiter let fall a few words of English of a sort, and Halsey ordered soup for her and a large whiskey-and-soda straightaway. She reappeared. Whatever she had done to her face in the interval successfully disguised its pallor, and she was evidently trying hard to keep herself in hand, sitting in her chair with her back as straight as a poker and her elbows close to her sides.

'Are you feeling a little better?' he asked gently.

'I think I can last out,' she said. 'How much longer is it?'

'Hanover next and the Customs. Then the last little bit on to Berlin. Did you sleep?'

'No.'

'Eat your soup, and then I'll ask the waiter what else there is. He speaks English.'

'How long do we stay here?'

'Some little time, I'm afraid. An hour or more yet.'

'I wish you could find me a quiet corner somewhere and a chair.'

'Eat your soup first and get that drink down. You see I don't want you far out of my sight.'

'It truly isn't necessary for you to be at my elbow every minute. I'm quite used to travelling by myself.'

'Say I like looking after you, then.'

'I shall be ill if you bother me. I just want to be somewhere quiet.'

'Well, have some more whiskey. I'm going to have another.'

As she ate her soup and drank her whiskey — she would have nothing else — he looked round the restaurant. There were fifty or sixty people there, of all kinds, but, except that Bettine's eyes drew looks to herself wherever she went, it seemed absurd that anybody here should take the least interest in her. In this bright, busy, windswept place she was as well able to look after herself as he was — better, since, if anybody did speak to her in German, she could at least answer them in the same language. None the less, her soup and drink finished, he was careful to find her a secluded corner in a waiting-room off a large hall surrounded by ticket-offices and information-bureaus. It was private enough for her to close her eyes in, and public enough to be safe, too. He passed a rug about her knees and placed his hand on her hair for a moment. Then he sought the flying-ground and a smoke.

He was watching them load luggage into a large white Farman when a voice behind him spoke.

'Well, how's she feeling now?'

He turned. It was their fellow passenger. There seemed no harm in him, but Hal was not travelling for the purpose of getting into conversation with strangers.

'Better, thanks,' he said.

'Not been up before, I suppose?'

'No.'

'Well, a night's sleep will set her all right. Are you going on to Berlin?'

'Yes.'

'Know Germany well?'

'I don't know it at all.'

'Nor the language? I heard the waiter talking English to you. Not that you need any German in Berlin. I'm going on to Prague presently, but I never grudge a night-out in Berlin on the way. You wouldn't know there'd been a war. Where are you staying?'

'I'm meeting friends,' said Hal curtly. This fellow was too talkative.

'Well, if you're having a look at the night life, I might be running across you. My name's Walker.'

Without giving his own name, Hal turned away.

The remainder of the time in Amsterdam he spent in the waiting-room, turning over the literature on the table and watching Bettine. She sat with her hat on her knees, her head fallen back, and her tired lids dropped, as if a weight within pulled them down. He was still watching her over the top of the Lufthansa pamphlet when a voice announced in English, 'Passengers for Berlin, please.' He spoke in her ear: 'Time to go, darling.' She rose and put on her hat. Out in the field a small queue was straggling across to the plane. Mr. Walker stood aside to allow Bettine and Halsey to proceed first. With the complement of passengers now full, he seemed almost an acquaintance. He was sucking something. He held out a small paper bag to Hal; they were acid drops. 'As we can't smoke,' he said; 'it's a long way to Hanover yet.' Bettine curled herself up in her seat precisely as before, the engines roared, and the aeroplane began the long monotonous second stage of its journey.

'*Haben sie, was zollbares?*'

Again they were down. The passengers were gathered in the Customs Hall and the baggage was being carried to the low tables. Through the wide open doors, with the late afternoon sun on it, Hanover could be seen a couple of miles away, a glowing mignonette of stone. It was Halsey who was being addressed by an enormously fat official in pale blue.

'*Haben sie, was zollbares?*'

Halsey might have guessed at the meaning of the question and shaken his head; he might even have said '*Nein*,' but Mr. Walker spoke behind him.

'He wants to know if you've anything to declare.'

'These cigarettes.' Halsey produced them.

'*Feuerwaffen?*'

'I'll see you through,' Mr. Walker reassured him. 'He says have you any firearms on you.'

'No,' said Hal, remembering for a moment the service revolver.

'*Parfüme?*'

'Don't you worry.' Mr. Walker took charge of Hal, speaking to the official in German. But apparently he spoke in vain. He turned to Hal again.

'He says you're to open it. It's one of their little ways. They'll let you through twenty times, then they drop on you. To-day everybody's got to open. Wind up about diamonds, perhaps. Got your keys?'

In a language Hal did not understand half a dozen people were grumblingly protesting. It was useless. Keys came out, the Customs tables were spread with the articles from the opened bags. Somebody had thrust between Halsey and Bettine; it was Mr. Walker, doing Halsey's job for him. He was speaking. Halsey heard the word 'chocolate.'

'*Das Fraülein gab die Chokolade an. Ich hörte es.*'

'*Bitte den Pass vorweisen.*'

Bettine seemed altogether past helping herself. She looked up, and her eyes seemed to melt into the blue of the official's uniform as he pointed to the handbag she carried. From it she took her passport. Halsey's passport was in the form of a small book, but Bettine's was a sheet, so stamped and written over and frayed with much folding and unfolding that it hung in tattered squares, dropping to pieces. Its very complexity seemed to accuse it in the official's eyes, for he said something in rapid German to Mr. Walker, and then beckoned to another official. This one signalled in turn to a woman almost as big as the first official, and Mr. Walker became indignant.

'Come, I call that high-handed!' he exclaimed. 'They might take her word for it. Well, we can't do anything about it. She's got to be searched.'

Bettine gave a violent little shake of her head as the woman touched her on the arm. The blue eyes flashed angrily. A door in the corner of the hall closed behind the two women.

In ten minutes she was back, her cheeks burning. Apparently she might now proceed on her journey, with her handful of chocolates too. The bags were passed, and a porter wheeled them away on a barrow. Bettine, Halsey, and the other passengers trooped back to the plane.

This time it headed away due east, with the sun level behind it.

The shadows were lengthening underneath. Whole tracts of country became twilight almost suddenly, cut off by the shadow of some ridge. Braunschweig and Helmstedt still caught a ray or two, Stendal and Tangermunde were lighting up. Lower still sank the sun, and forward in the pilot's cabin a mysterious blue light appeared. Seven o'clock came, half-past eight. One by one the ground lights began to appear. All day long the exhausts over the metal wings had been an invisible agitation of hot tormented gas; now to left and right they became incandescent, raved in the growing darkness like twin amethyst devils, while over the operator's head the valves beamed mild as milk. Bettine sat as cramped up and motionless as she had sat all day. The passengers dozed. Halsey thanked God the journey was nearly over.

It was towards half-past eight that a low gold haze began to show on the horizon ahead. It drew nearer and split up into clusters and distinguishable lines and rectangles. Ever brighter and more distinct these became, and suddenly the aeroplane signalled back to them with a ruby light that started up over either engine. Another five minutes passed, seven, eight. A glow shone up on the cabin roof. The effulgence below became that of a furnace, the fires and arcs and catherine-wheels of Berlin. Seen from above, the second largest city in Europe, the third in the world, seemed to have gone mad with brilliance. Endless streets, cascades of lights of theatres and restaurants, the lamps of the crawling cars, became more intense as there came the sense of the loss of height. Followed a banking and a sudden silence. The aeroplane seemed to float in gold.

Then something happened on the wing-tips. A raw whitey-green light bathed the air about them, altering the colour of the faces in the cabin. They were the aeroplane's own flares, surrounding it with a hissing green day.

But the Flüghafen lies to the south of the town. Bathed in its ghastly green, the aeroplane turned away from the golden furnace. Soon only an isolated arc-lamp or two, hooded from the eyes above, burned in the darkness. The white buildings of the Tempelhofer field climbed up and up. Over the dim and floodlighted landing-ground the wing-rockets trailed their last incandescent embers. Down the machine came, touched, taxied, came to rest. Halsey looked at his watch. It was just nine o'clock.

IV

One small piece of officiousness on Mr. Walker's part Halsey had to put up with before they left the

Tempelhofer that night. Knowing the place better than Hal, their fellow traveller made his way straight to the counter where the porter had deposited the two bags. 'I can give you a lift if you like,' he said to Hal; 'my hotel's only just a little farther along the street.' But from the rank outside the Flüghafen, Halsey hailed his own taxi. With a 'Good-night, and thank you for the acid-drops,' he put Bettine into it. Off the taxi sped in the direction of the Belle Alliance Platz and the Wilhelmstrasse.

And now he must get her to bed at once. Whatever business she had could wait till the morning. If she was hungry, she could have something served in her room. It would be better still if she would lie in bed till midday. He could take a stroll round by himself and meet her at lunch.

As the taxi passed trees, with the lights of cafés beyond them, she suddenly spoke.

'Does he know where to go?'

'Yes. And you'll go straight up to your room, won't you, darling?' he begged.

'Yes,' she whispered faintly as her head fell back again.

'Thank God, *that's* over!' he breathed. It had been a ghastly time.

A few minutes later the taxi drew up before the glass awning of a huge hotel. A uniformed attendant flung open the taxi door, another seized the bags. Under electric-lighted lime-trees they passed into a vestibule, and thence through silent cut-glass doors into a vast entrance-hall, where half Berlin seemed to be assembled. And Hal needed no Mr. Walker to assist him in a cosmopolitan place like this. He walked up to a busy reception-counter. It was as big as many an office, but it seemed a mere quadrant of brass and varnish in one corner of that place of marble and mirrors and rubber carpet, with vaulted halls and corridors that stretched away in every direction.

'Good-evening. My name's Vibart,' he said. 'I believe you have two rooms reserved.'

The clerk did not even consult a ledger. He bowed and reached for keys.

'Good-evening, Mr. Vibart. You had a pleasant passage? Not too much wind? I will show you the suite myself.'

Round the corner of one of the halls was the row of lifts. Into one of these they stepped, and in a second or two the cage stopped again with effortless precision at the fourth floor. They followed their guide along apparently endless low-lighted, red-carpeted corridors, with service-tables here and there at intervals, and along yet another passage that probably gave on another street than that of the front entrance of the hotel. At the extreme end of it the clerk stopped and selected a key.

'It is a very small suite,' he said, turning on the light; 'two rooms and a bathroom between. If you would prefer one with a sitting-room... *Bitte?*' he broke off to say as Bettine spoke.

Again it was in the German of which Hal understood nothing. Out of a number of words all he caught were 'Ja, ja... nein, nein... Telephon.' In the room in which they stood was a small bedside-table with a telephone on it. To this Bettine had run. All her exhaustion had fallen from her. The blue eyes danced like witch-fires in her face. He heard her ask for a number, and then this:

'Allo-allo-allo... Ja... Guten Abend... Ja, gerade angekommen.... Sobald als möglich; bin schön ganz kribblig... Ja, dann ist's uberstanden... Vierhundertfünfündzwanzig... nehmen sie ein Taxi... rasch...'

Then she hung up abruptly and turned to the clerk.

'This room will do for me if the Herr likes the other. Show it to him, and then send the bags up at once.'

One word had filled Halsey with alarm. He had caught one word of her talk at the telephone, the word 'taxi.' He turned to her.

'I say, you're not going out?' he asked, his eyes anxiously on her face.

'No. Why?'

'I thought you were ringing up a taxi.'

'No. Go and see if your room's all right.'

He walked through the bathroom, but hardly looked at the room that opened from the other end of it. A fat crimson *soufflé* made a balloon of its bed, on the ornamental writing-table was lace with the monogram of the hotel, and the electric-light fittings that hung from the high ceiling resembled triple Indian clubs of bronze. His room, like Bettine's, had a door that led to a narrow inside passage that formed part of the suite, and an outer door led to the main corridor and the rest of the hotel.

Passing through the bathroom again, he tapped at Bettine's door, which she had closed.

'Come in,' she called. 'Oh, it's you,' she added as he entered. 'I thought it was the bags.'

From the bag she carried with her she had taken a small stick, and was touching up her lips. Her face was now animated; not a trace remained of the prostrated creature who had crouched motionless in an aeroplane all day.

'What about something to eat?' he asked her.

She gave a final glance at herself in the bag's two inches of mirror, and then put the outfit away. 'Oh, I can't be bothered,' she said. 'You go and get something if you want it.'

'But you're going to bed, aren't you?'

'Presently. As a matter of fact, I'm expecting somebody.'

'Not to-night, dearest,' he pleaded. 'Leave it till to-morrow.'

She laughed. Leave it till to-morrow! 'There's the porter with the bags,' she said as there came a knock at the door. 'Bring them in.'

He brought them in and set them down, his own on the floor, hers on the crimson *soufflé* of the bed, into the billows of which it sank. Then he stood, feeling like something left in mid-air. There he was, in her bedroom, in a foreign hotel, with a single outer door to shut them completely off from the rest of the world. And she had had a long and exhausting day. It only remained for him to say good-night to her and take himself off.

But suddenly he found something to do. He picked up the flowers he had bought for her in London, carried them to her table, filled a glass, and put them into water. She was taking things from the bag on the bed, her brushes, slippers, a toilet-bottle or two, a cut-glass rubber-bulbed spray. It seemed strange that that same thin blue dressing-gown that he had seen in Audrey's flat should be here, neatly packed in a little square. He remembered that she hadn't had time to put on her slippers when he had taken her into his arms all warm and moist in that; she had run to open Audrey's door to him in her bare feet. And here, too, B.-J. or somebody had provided an outer door to lock them in

She looked up from the bag, calmly and patiently, and he gave an awkward little laugh.

'Well, I suppose I ought to be saying good-night,' he said.

'Perhaps you ought,' she answered, without much expression.

'Then — good-night, most dearly loved ——' Impulsively he held out his arms. A kiss would have contented him till to-morrow.

But she shrank back. 'No,' she said, and he remembered that she was expecting somebody.

'Who is this you're expecting?' he asked.

She answered lightly. 'Oh, my doctor, if you like. Thank you for taking care of me. I'm quite all right again. And you really must go now.'

'Darling ——' he began, and a little of her patience seemed to leave her.

'It's quite all right. Things have to be done. There's nothing you need to be in the least afraid of. If you'd come in, instead of being neither in nor out, I might have told you a little more. I'm rather tired, and I don't want you to make me angry.'

'A kiss, then,' he begged.

She put her face forward. It was kiss enough, warm and ungrudged for that matter, but it also pushed him away. He picked up his bag.

'Good-night and good sleep, darling,' he said.

Then he passed through the bathroom into his own room.

But he did not unpack. He stood looking at his closed bag for a moment, then returned to the bathroom, switched on the light, washed his hands and face, and paused for a moment with the towel in his hands and his eyes on Bettine's closed door. Then he switched off again, took his hat and gloves, and went out.

It would be easier to be right away from that door.

Along the empty red corridors he passed, wondering where the lifts were. Unless some chance-met member of the staff spoke English, he could not even ask. Bettine might have been saying anything when she had spoken in German. What had the conversation over the telephone been? Who was this 'doctor' for whom she had done up her lips — not, of course, that there was anything in that? Anyway, here he and she were. All must *not* be allowed to end as it had ended in that grisly dream of his at the Maximilian Hotel, when she had dashed out of his Morris and had fled from him across Piccadilly. Turning a corner he saw the gilded and mirrored and upholstered lifts ahead. He touched the bell. The cage shot up. He entered, and dropped like a stone on cushioned air to the ground-level again.

He was stepping out of the lift when he saw a tall man entering the next one. Had he been in London he would have said that he had seen the man before, but in Berlin this was too unlikely to be entertained. He turned to look again, but the bottom of the lift was already disappearing upwards. Still, in London he would have sworn he had seen that figure before.

He did not feel very much like walking about the streets of a strange capital for the first time in the dark, looking for this life that really didn't begin till after midnight. Across the other side of the entrance-hall was what looked like the bar of the hotel. He made his way to it. It was the bar, with a polished counter and bottles and a hunting-scene painted in a wide lunette above them. More to the purpose, there was cold food, sardines, sausages, sandwiches, salads, and a white-jacketed barman. The place was empty except for a man and a woman who talked together in a corner. Hal had both English notes and unfamiliar German ones of unknown denominations. He pulled out one of these, put it as a pledge on the counter, and began to help himself to food. The barman spoke, in hearty German-American.

'Good-evening, sir.'

'Oh, good-evening. I say, I don't know quite how much money that note is ——'

'Are you staying in the hotel?'

'Yes. Five hundred and twenty-five.'

'Mr. Vibart?'

'Yes.'

'Then that's all right,' said the barman, pushing the note back. 'That's all arranged for.'

'Oh!' said Hal as he pocketed the note again.

Suddenly, halfway through a sandwich, he paused, as he had paused in the bathroom with the towel in his hands. That tall man who had got into the next lift, the one Halsey would have sworn he had seen before if this had been London and not Berlin: *who* was he? He had been going up as Halsey came down; was he her 'doctor'? What was it about him that had seemed familiar? A tall, heavy man; had he had a beard? Hadn't a tall, heavy man with a beard once ——

The devil! It was! It was her Russian teacher, the fellow who had talked to Halsey about the Loubianka, the man who allowed women to live as long as they obeyed him and broke them across his knee when they did not! *That* was the fellow she had been telephoning to! Her appointment here was with him, and it was of such urgency that it would not keep till the morning, but she must receive him in her bedroom the very moment of her arrival!

Halsey Vibart was on his feet. It was no good telling himself that he could do nothing. What was he here for? To go on eating sandwiches he needn't pay for while she was locked in alone with a fellow like that? He was going up to see that it was all right. He was going to knock at her door. If she wouldn't open it, he was going to wait outside till this precious frontier-lurker of a Papa of hers came out. Beyond that it was no use thinking yet. He jumped up and crossed the marble and gilded hall. He turned to the lifts. The gates clashed softly behind him and he was shot up. Again he entered those silent, low-lighted red corridors. It took him minutes to find the proper turning, the one that ended, not on the main street, but on some street at the side or back of the hotel. But he did find it. There was the single outer door, with the two doors, hers and his, beyond it. Softly he put the key in, opened the door, and turned to the right, towards his own room. As he did so the smell of a cigar greeted him.

He put his hat and gloves on the bed and opened the door that led to the bathroom. Ah! The door beyond was brightly half open. It had been closed when he had left, so either she or somebody else had been into the bathroom. He could either tap, or make ordinary noises as he approached, or walk straight in.

Then inside the room a thick, foreign voice spoke.

'Keep still — it is a little long, but it must be finished. Then you have a holiday for a week. You have been a good girl.'

Faint and muffled Bettine's voice came. 'I didn't get to sleep last night.'

'You shall sleep when I have finished. With him if you like. It will no longer make an upsetting. But it would be better to wait a little.'

Halsey advanced. He stood a little way back from the half-open door, looking in.

It was too late now to wish that he had stayed down in the bar. Did he even wish it, or did he stand there fascinated, with every moment and incident of that day of her effort so brightly and simultaneously explained? Why even for a single moment had it not told its own story — her air-sickness before they had left the ground, her shivers whenever any one had approached her, her not wanting to get out of the plane, her dozing in the waiting-room at Amsterdam, her detention at Hanover that they might hale her off and strip her? She had been no more air-sick than Halsey himself. That half-bared body displayed before his eyes was as strong as a colt's. Her back must have feared and abhorred the lightest touch of her garments upon it. No chafing-dish to heat a letter was here; her own flesh, from shoulder-blades to waist, was her paper. Those arms that had been about his head, those breasts to which it had been gathered, were sunk in the crimson eiderdown. The edge of the bed was lectern enough for him as he sat on a chair behind her with her back between his knees, and, on the floor, where her clothing fell from her waist as she knelt, a bottle of liquid and the rubber-bulbed spray. He had put down his cigar on the table by her flowers, and was leaning short-sightedly forward copying into a notebook; Hal saw the edge of his glasses, like a pale rim of onion on a plate of *hors d'œuvres*. His hand went to the spray on the floor. There was a slight hissing as it travelled from left to right and from right to left again, and her flesh seemed to cringe under the thin little cloud. Up under the reagent started the small tattoo-like markings of whatever it was that had had to be conveyed after this fashion from one country to another.

'Keep still — I spray again — this is not clear,' he gruffly ordered her, and again that warm back that had responded to Halsey's kiss shivered under the cool vapour.

And she was entirely safe with him. He would have laid a whip across that back if it had betrayed his message, but as long as it kept still and told him what he wanted to know, he was as indifferent to it as if it had been a slab of engraved stone. Halsey, as a matter of fact, found the cigar almost the worst to bear. The flowers he had bought Bettine were carnations, and the blue curl of the cigar was filtering pungently up through them. Without ceasing his reading and copying, Papa reached for the cigar. Its loose hot ash missed her slender flank, but fell among her clothing.

Nor did Halsey need telling who had written on that tender page for Papa to read. It could only have been one person. Between them an elderly Russian exile and a humped-shouldered man with an abnormal head had torn open something Halsey would have kept a secret for himself alone, and, code, text, list of names, or whatever the writing was, Halsey would never know what had been written and read there.

But no further harm would befall her. She had merely wanted to get it over all in one formidable day.

Silently he moved away from the door.

An hour or more later, from a seat in the entrance-hall, he saw Papa step out of the lift. He had his glasses on, and it was not to be expected that he should carry his notebook in his hand. He passed Halsey without seeing him. Ten minutes later still, as Halsey slipped softly into his own room, there was a smell of hot steam and sounds of splashing and wallowing. Bettine, just at the other side of the closed door, was having a bath

V

At twelve o'clock the next day, Halsey was sitting in the Sieges Allee, alone, on a semi-circular stone bench with statuary. A twelfth-century Margrave formed the centre piece of the group, and he was watched over by two busts on the balustrade behind him, one of them a bulldog-looking fellow with a mitre on his head and a wart on his nose like Cromwell. Across the Allee another group faced this: William the First with his bulldogs, Bismarck and von Moltke. To right and left the groups stretched away to the Kemperplatz, Kings, Kaisers, Margraves, Electors, with the tall Siegessaule at one end and legendary Roland at the other. Halsey could have read in his guide-book how only the groups on the east side were guaranteed authentic, the rest latterly exhumed in order that the story might be put into history while one waited. He could have looked at that First William opposite and reflected that with a Second William the half-written scroll had been abruptly rolled up again. But he had no mind for any of these things. His feet were crossed in front of him, his doubled fists made lumps deep in his trousers pockets, his chin was sunk on his breast, his eyes were on the sunny ground, his mind a blank screen, which he tried to keep blank.

But the pictures would project themselves upon it. When he frowned and shut his eyes, they only became brighter. Words accompanied the pictures, for his lips moved and he muttered from time to time, weak little snatches of dialogue that he knew did him no good. Why wasn't he back in England looking for another job? How long was he going to hang on here, with aeroplane-tickets given him, his money graciously pushed back to him when he tried to buy a sandwich? (Picture: a German-American barman polishing a glass smiling, and saying, 'Mr. Vibart? That's all right, we have full instructions about you and the little blue-eyed Fräulein in the quietest suite in the whole hotel.') What was he going to do when he got back and where was he going to live? (Picture: Clarry Moss in bed among the furniture, reading Company Law by the light of a torch and nearly bringing chairs and tables down in a heap as he started forward to offer up his own girl as a sacrifice.) What was this infatuation of his? Hadn't he his lesson at last? Hadn't he been warned all along what to expect? (Picture: a dusky blue evening wrap dim as a twilight pool, on which floated a face like a lotus-flower, with eyes that gave back the last of the light of the skies.) He had listened at her bedroom door before coming out that morning. No sound had come from behind it. After that tense day of cramping and will-effort in the aeroplane, it would not be surprising if she slept till tea-time. Halsey had slept not at all.

He was also becoming aware that except for those sandwiches he hadn't had to pay for, he had had nothing to eat since that half-meal at Amsterdam the day before. His lips moved again; he was mockingly deriding himself, savagely defending himself in those dialogues. 'Well, what about it now, young Vibart?... Shut up, let a fellow alone.... That bad piece of work in her bedroom with his cigar poisoning your carnations?... For God's sake, shut up.... Tannic acid or whatever it was, and him with her between his knees like that, fetching it up with a spray.... Why the devil didn't you burst in then?... That cigar-ash didn't touch her; it only fell on her frock.... What can I do, what can I do?... Why, go back to her, and pretend you don't know anything about it, and ask her if she's had a nice sleep and isn't she going to kiss you good-morning...'

He jumped up. She might be awake by this time. He started to walk back to the hotel.

For he knew that he could not, dared not, tell her that he had seen. She herself would never, never tell him. If he asked her who it was she had rung up on the telephone the moment of her arrival, she was quite capable of looking him in the face to see whether he knew, deciding that he did not, and saying it was some girl-friend. And that would make them both liars, for another dialogue shaped itself in his mind as he walked, with Bettine taking part in it this time. 'I hope your friend didn't stay very long last night?... No, she only stayed a very short time; then I went to bed... I went for a walk in the Unter den Linden.... Did you? I didn't hear you come in... (No, you liar, you were washing it off again.) Aren't you going to say good-morning, darling?'

So he mocked himself, and at this point, just as she was giving him that morning kiss of kisses, he reached the hotel.

He was passing the reception-counter when it occurred to him that if there were any letters for Bettine, he might as well take them up. It was hardly likely there would be any for himself.

'But the Fräulein has already had her letters,' the clerk said.

'Do you mean you sent them up?' He hadn't wanted them to wake her.

'No. The Fräulein came for them. She went out half an hour ago.'

Gone out! 'Did she leave a message?' Hal asked.

'No, sir. A gentleman called and sent his name up, and she sent word down he was to wait, and they went out together.'

'A tall gentleman with a beard?'

'No, an English-looking gentleman.'

'She didn't say when she would be back?'

'No, Mr. Vibart.'

Then, if she had left no word, Halsey thought as he turned away, she would certainly be back to lunch, and might return at any moment. Telling the clerk to let her know he was in the hotel, he went up to his room on the fourth floor. It was possible that she had left a note. But there was no note, and, seeing her door open, he went in. Lying on her bed was a cardboard square with a sentence in German printed upon it and a small string as if to hang it up on a nail. He turned it over and found the English translation on the other side: 'To Hang Up if you do not Wish to be Disturbed.' Returning to his own room, he found that a similar card had been placed on the writing-table. He descended to the ground floor again.

At two o'clock there was no sign of her, and still he had not eaten. Because he suspected that he was the biggest fool alive, anger began to stir in him. He wasn't going into that bar to eat their free sandwiches, nor was he going to wait much longer for her in that overgrown hotel where they knew his name before he arrived. It was damnable that she should treat him like this. He knew that he had made his mistake weeks ago, when he had funked having things out with her once for all. Now she thought she could do as she liked. She could, in fact, do as she liked, and she seemed to be showing that she could. Curse that clerk, looking at him over the counter as if he knew Halsey's business in Berlin better than Halsey knew it himself! Halsey strode out of the hotel.

He saw very little of Berlin that afternoon; the third largest city in the world was no more to him than the pavement or Platz where he and his thoughts happened to be. Apparently there had been trouble, or was about to be trouble in some part of the town, for black-helmeted policemen in black boots went about in couples with revolvers in their holsters, and Halsey saw one of them jump onto the running-board of a moving car and speak to a couple of superior officers inside. Then he resumed his walk. Through the Tiergarten he strayed, and found himself in a quarter crowded with traffic like a town and gay with sunny trees like a garden. There mingled with the noise of the vehicles the strains of a string band; they came from a large cosmopolitan Appenrodtish-looking place through the glass windows of which people at tables could be seen. '*Cafe am Zoo*,' he read, and stood looking at a bill of fare that was displayed outside. The music grew suddenly louder in his ears as he entered a large half-circular hall with high cream-painted galleries round it and a domed ceiling of gilded scales. He sat down at a table with a screen to his left, and made a bold adventure into the German tongue.

'Kartoffelsalat. Roastbeef. Bier,' he said, and sat back, listening to the *Pathétique*.

How these people did play! Who would have thought it from their bull-necks, their thick hands, their shining flesh that made you hot to look at it, the vast-bosomed women in chintzes and cretonnes? He found himself pausing as he cut his meat; as the phrase began again, he waited for that yearning note that he could never hear unmoved. The traffic of the crowded street seemed to hush itself; then came the note; and then Fate played on him her dirtiest trick of all. Fresh as a flower, in a pair of new brown-and-white shoes to match the new costume and hat, she came in. She passed beyond the edge of the screen to the interior of the café. She was followed by Mr. Walker.

'It's not my fault you came,' Bettine said crossly. 'If you thought you were going to keep me in your pocket all the time, you thought wrong, that's all. He took me out to lunch. He took me to a lovely place. He knows Berlin. Then we went to the Zoo.'

It was half-past eight that same evening, and they were in Bettine's bedroom. Laid out on the crimson bed was a silver frock, a new one, but it might almost have been the same one that he had fastened up for her that other evening in Audrey's studio. A pair of slim silver slippers went with it, and she was going to wear them that night.

'And at least he helped me through the Customs, which was more than you did,' she told him. 'You'd better get a conversation-book at the bookstall downstairs. Then if you can't read it, you can point to it.'

'Dearest ——' he said, his face all drawn.

'And I'm having dinner with you and you can come along with us afterwards if you like, but I'm going to be out of work soon, and I'm not throwing away the chance of a good job. He has an office in New Bond Street. He asked me last night to go out with him, when you were getting the taxi at the Flüghafen, if you must know.'

Yes, he told himself heavily, this at least had nothing to do with B.-J. and his business. This Mr. Walker, who was going on to Prague presently, was merely a middle-aged philanderer who didn't miss chances when there was a pretty girl in the offing. And she knew it and let him. They were going on to a dancing-place together that night, and Halsey might come, too, if he liked.

'He's bringing another girl,' Bettine said. 'At least, he'll want to know whether he's to bring her or not. I was to telephone him. If you'll say whether you're coming or not, I'll telephone him now. Then if you're going to change, you'd better do so. Will you have your bath first?'

An hour later, they were in the dining-room of the hotel, she eating ravenously, he little, hardly even tasting the wine he drank. She wore the silver, and her arms were exquisitely slender among the ham-like shapes of those of the women at the neighbouring tables. It was ten minutes since they had spoken. Halsey was thinking of enterprising Mr. Walker, who was bringing the other girl to make the fourth. Mr. Walker might be giving Bettine a job presently at his office in New Bond Street. Mr. Walker was in hopes. He had done these things before. And so had Bettine. She made no concealment of it now. There was little doubt which would prove the victor. And in such hopes, Mr. Walker was ——

Suddenly she said she wanted a liqueur. 'A crême-de-menthe,' she said, and when it was brought she sat playing with it, squinting at it, dipping the tip of her tongue into it, trying its little green light on her finger as if it had been the jewel of a ring. 'And if you're going to be a wet blanket, you'd far better stay where you are,' she told him.

The hour they spent in the lounge after dinner seemed as if it would never come to an end.

It was half an hour or so after midnight when the taxi set them down at a garish, red-lighted establishment in the Lutherstrasse. Halsey almost choked on entering, so thick was the atmosphere, and, pushing his way through a hall and a vestibule, stood waiting for her at the opening of a vast crowded room with great square glass pillars filled with electric light, a floor-space for dancing that was rapidly becoming smaller as the tables encroached on it, and coloured puffballs of cotton-wool already flying about. Waiters passed champagne over heads, saxophones lowed like cattle; and just as Halsey's lungs were becoming accustomed to the fumes of cigar-smoke, food, perfume, wine, and people, Bettine joined him.

'He said he'd keep a table at that far corner over there,' she said, and they passed through a long crowded bar with coloured advertisements of spas and watering-places and the supper-room a yard below on the left. Already Halsey saw Mr. Walker's hailing arm. They descended three or four steps and made their way through. There was nothing to pay for admission, merely champagne to order, and Mr. Walker had already seen to that. Hal gathered that the lady to whom Mr. Walker introduced him had something to do with the films. She was at least slim, and she spoke a little English, so nobody could say that Mr. Walker hadn't done his best for Hal. About them pressed the bulging shaven necks of men and the bare backs of women. Rows of hatted people looked down from the bar-rail. The ceiling, Halsey thought, would have fascinated B.-J., for it, too, was of looking-glass, like the one that was for ever about to spill the drinks from the glasses and the flowers from the bowls, but this was of faintly prismatic-hued glass, and wavy and watery like the sea, so that the solid people underneath lost their outlines in it and the pillars filled with electric light corkscrewed about in it like lights seen in a river. Four bottles stood on the table. 'A bottle apiece to begin with,' Mr. Walker hospitably announced, and already he had filled the glasses. 'Better than acid-drops, eh, Vibart?' he said. 'Ah! Cabaret!'

A drummer had thumped a drum, and a woman, to all intents and purposes nude, had bounded out from somewhere. Mr. Walker had stood up. 'Can you see?' he asked, and placed Bettine in front of him. The faces were thick along the barrier that separated the dancing-room from the bar. Halsey, instead of standing up, watched the elastic reflection of the dancer in the ceiling; only when she made a sudden spring and was astride her partner's throat did he see the sinewy limbs themselves. No known country's blood was in her veins, but in words and phrases from every language in Europe she was pattering and answering the spectators back, and Halsey poured out Mr. Walker's champagne. He would buy more himself presently. The band crashed into a whirling *pas-deux*. Like a starfish the woman was being swung round in circles by one leg, making a blurred wheel in the wavy cirrus above. Hoarse shouting and frenzied clapping of hands broke out as the dance ended, and Bettine sat down at the table again.

'And now another little drink wouldn't do us any harm,' said the genial Mr. Walker. 'Finish those heeltaps ——'

Halsey passed the film-lady's glass and his own.

'Prosit — you'll have to learn German, Vibart. What have you been doing with yourself all day?'

The next moment he was talking in German to Bettine.

The waiter had set down on the table paper bags full of the puffballs. The band had struck up again and the assembly was dancing. The lady of the films gave Halsey an inviting look over the brim of her glass.

'You make a long stay in Bair-leen?' she asked.

'No, I don't think very long.'

'Fräulein Frühling, she make a long stay?'

'I don't think so.'

'She is very pretty. He is very nice, your Mr. Walker.'

'He's not my Mr. Walker. I hardly know him.'

'You are cousin, or what is it, to Fräulein Frühling?'

'No.'

'No relation?'

'No.'

Again he saw the film-lady's eyes over the glass. They were naughty, understanding eyes. 'Prosit,' they said, and he reached for the bottle.

A little to Halsey's right was a woman's back plump as a pneumatic cushion and dazzlingly white. All at once Halsey began to write on it. Nobody saw him, of course; the lady herself remained unaware of it; Halsey only wrote on it in his mind, but 'My darling ——' he wrote, and stopped, not knowing how to go on. That struck him as silly. He had not come to Berlin to write on ladies' backs; he had come to protect Bettine, and if he couldn't protect her in German, he could in English. But he could hardly jump up that very moment and tear her from the arms of the hospitable Mr. Walker whose champagne he was drinking. A waiter was hurrying past. Perhaps Halsey had better get even about the champagne now. There were already two unopened bottles on the table, but he seized the waiter's apron.

'Zwei more,' he said. 'Big ones. You tell him, Fräulein.'

And then suddenly Halsey held out both his hands. If he was going to dance with Bettine when Mr. Walker had finished with her, he had better dance with this one now.

'Come and dance,' he said.

Confidingly the lady placed her cheek against his breast, and the wavy ceiling reflected Halsey and his partner, too.

The puffballs were flying about merrily, with the eyes of the throwers thrown after them. On her return, Bettine pounced on the paper bags on the table. 'That's the style!' Mr. Walker applauded. 'Bet you can't throw them up and catch them in your mouth!'

Bettine was sitting opposite to Hal. He saw her mouth open like a rosy cave. Up went a puffball as blue as her eyes; up went a pink one, then a white one. They bobbed off from her chin and cheeks.

'Damn!' she laughed, upsetting her half-filled glass over the table.

'All right — here's my handkerchief.' Mr. Walker's hand shot out. 'Plenty more, and it didn't touch your pretty frock. Who ordered this?' he asked, as the waiter came up at that moment.

'I did,' said Hal, beginning to write on that plump bare back to his right again.

'My own darling ——' he wrote, and stopped. Of course, he ought to have had a cigar in his mouth and hot ash to drop. His eyes went to the bar almost as if he thought of getting up and buying one. He could read the advertisements of the spas and watering-places, Baden, Wiesbaden, Bad Kissingen. A head moved, cutting off a syllable of this last, and 'Bad Kissing,' Halsey read, and suddenly laughed loudly. That was really very funny. 'Bad Kissing.' It would be rather a joke to write that on the lady's back, and then bring it up with a scent-spray and make everybody laugh. The waiter was opening the champagne, and Mr. Walker was protesting — it was his party ——

''S not your party,' said Halsey. 'Only met you in an aeroplane. Carry on waiter,' and he took the bottle from the waiter's hands. He was fumbling with the wire when the band struck up again, and Bettine was off with Mr. Walker down the room.

'Fräulein Bettine is beginning to behave very badly,' said the film-lady archly.

'Let's all enjoy ourselves,' said Halsey. 'Come and dance.'

Why not? Mr. Walker was going on to Prague. Perhaps he would be off to-morrow, and then Halsey would have Bettine all to himself, and they could stay in Berlin as long as they liked. Perhaps Old Man Walker wasn't such a bad sort really; he had helped Bettine about the chocolates that time when the Customs woman had marched her off and searched her. And — ha, ha, ha! — that letter to Papa had been on her back all the time! Strong little body, to be able to stick it out like this!... The film-lady was nestling up to him, and other bare backs were moving round him in blurred circles; they ought all to be sprayed; wouldn't there be a jumping if Halsey were to get a syphon and squirt them all! But no. He would be turned out. Kind of thing not done. Ladies' backs were their own, all white like cherry-trees. Kiss them, not write on them with tannic or whatever it was. He was suddenly very solemn. He didn't want Mr. Walker to give Bettine a job. Asked them if they minded staying an hour later and then stayed behind themselves, too. That fellow Walker had no business to have called for Bettine at the hotel. Halsey was looking after her, not Mr. Walker. Tell that bounder Walker his business, butting in like that ——

Then he shook with laughter again, so that the face on his breast looked up.

'What are you laughing at?'

'Over by the bar — can't you see it?'

'I can see the bar ——'

'There, just over the barman's head — Bad Kissing ——' and he explained his joke.

The lady, too, shook with laughing. They were both convulsed with laughter.

'Is kissing so bad?' she asked shyly.

'No, but see what I mean — Bad Kissing ——'

And off they both went again.

The air that had at first made him choke was now like wine to him. Much of it was wine. In fact, the whole evening was turning out the wildest lark. Looked at that way, the whole adventure since they had left London was a lark. He knew what he wanted to write on all those women's backs; 'Darling Bettine, such fun,' he wanted to write, 'aeroplane, quick, rush to the hotel telephone, all over in one day, then nice bath and enjoy yourself.' He hadn't told his partner about writing on backs yet. Quite nice girl, lots of fun. He whispered again into the ear against his breast. Her fingers on his lips stopped him.

'Oh, please don't make me laugh any more,' she stifled.

And, of course, no man can ever behave as badly as any woman can. When they got back to the table, Bettine was behaving very badly, indeed. She was working Old Man Walker all she knew. With a thread she had got from somewhere she had made herself a pair of ear-rings of the puffballs, as children do with cherries. They were pink ones, like that pink cave of a mouth she had tried to catch them in, and to-morrow or the next day Old Man Walker would be going on to Prague, and if she wanted Halsey to go to the Consulate about their marriage, he would go, and if she looked at him as she was looking at Old Man Walker now, well, Consul or no Consul, something would have to happen, and that little suite at the back of the hotel was the quietest place imaginable, and he had once held her all warm and moist from her bath, and they needn't stay in Berlin, because he could send to England for some more money, and they could buy clothes, and go off to Austria or the Adriatic or Greece, where she wouldn't want a job, except just to be with him ——

'Give me Berlin,' Mr. Walker was saying. 'Paris if you like — but Berlin for me ——'

'Oh, Bair-leen!' The film-lady turned up her eyes.

'Fill up, Walker — fill 'em all up ——' Halsey raised his voice.

'No, no — enough's as good as — work to-morrow ——'

'Don't croak about to-morrow yet — 's to-morrow to-day — Bettine ——'

But even he, drunk as he was, could see that something had happened to her. She had forgotten she was wearing the pink puffball ear-rings; in the new frock she was sitting as straight as a silver arrow in her chair, her arms stiffly at her sides, her eyes on the film-artiste's face. Already he was half sober.

'What was that you said?' Bettine was asking slowly.

'I told him not to make me laugh any more. Oh, I ache! Bad Kissing' — she spluttered again — 'oh, it was funny — it is in the bar behind you — and he was writing it on that lady's back ——'

Slowly Bettine's eyes came round to Halsey's. They were cold with contempt and hate. For a time that seemed endless that look froze him. Then, 'Cowardly cad!' she said, and with a violent gesture flung the remaining puffballs into his face. They rolled away in various directions on the floor.

As he went up to bed at dawn, he read on her door the card she had hung out there: 'To Hang Up if You do not Wish to be Disturbed.'

His train steamed out of the Friedrichstrasse Station at two o'clock the next day.

VI

One by one Ben had seen them go up, the long row of temporary war-buildings on the Embankment, the wooden canteens and coffee-stalls of Parliament Square and Victoria, the creosoted structures on the drained lake of Saint James's Park (the subsequent filling-in again of which gave his Office of Works so much trouble). All over London they had pushed up like brown toadstools, annexes, hostels, housing for new activities, Y.M.C.A. huts. And one by one Ben had seen them taken away again. The temporary Cenotaph had gone, the permanent one had taken its place. Except for a few splinters taken out of the plinth of the Needle, London was pre-war again.

But somewhere on the northern fringe of the W.C. District a patch of brown still remained. It stood on a vacant site behind a hoarding, and a couple of weather-beaten notice-boards announced that it was for sale. Since it was for sale, it must belong to somebody. Since that somebody was evidently an absentee, it needed a caretaker. And because hutments are excellent shelters as they stand, but sometimes a bad bargain to take down and cart away and set up somewhere else, this particular group looked like stopping where it was pending a clearance of the whole site.

The caretaker of these premises was Clarry Moss. He had gone (he said) carefully into the legal position. Being a caretaker (he had argued) was sufferance, and didn't bestow any rights. Therefore the question of Inhabited House Duty did not arise. Who he wangled into all this doesn't matter now. Men slept unmolested in all sorts of places about that time, in railway-carriages on the sidings, in omnibuses in the *dépôts*, in barges on the river, on the grass in the Park, under the railings of Saint-Martin's-in-the-Fields. Thanks to the extent of his reading in the 'Constable's Guide to his Daily Duties' Clarry had made a particular friend of a youthful constable on that beat. And he had driven Halsey Vibart's belongings from Parkinson's yard himself.

A curtain across one of the smaller huts divided the place into two. It was made of Halsey's old Bedford Row curtains slung from an iron roof-tie, and as it did not reach the floor by a couple of feet or so, the legs of any one walking about behind it could be seen. So, if you stooped a little, could the occupant of the bed. A six-foot soldiers' table with a green baize top, a copper reflector lamp with a bulbous chimney, and a dart-board, were the only portable objects for which Clarry was officially responsible. The rest, including the Morris that stood out in the open at the back of the shed, was his guv'nor's.

The table with the green baize top was Clarry's study. On it were his nests of cigarette-cards, the 'Police Constable's Guide,' and 'Outlines of Company Law.' His notebooks and loose papers were kept in place by Halsey's little blocks of spruce. As the yellow shade with the black cats on it was useless for the reflector lamp, Clarry had pinned it to the wall, where he frequently raised his eyes to it for luck. A red-and-blue pencil, a bottle of ink, a fountain-pen, and a small pocket dictionary completed his office equipment.

Clarry sat pen in hand, the reflector lamp a little to his left, his left hand smoothing his sleekly brilliantined hair. From the curtained-off portion of the apartment stole the vacant notes of a flute. These did not disturb Clarry; rather they soothed him, as the pleasant smell of his brilliantined palm soothed him, and the modest repletion of a supper of cold pork, the crackling of which had been exceptionally rich and crisp. It wasn't a symphony his guv'nor was playing, because a symphony was that bit of a chord-on just before the comedian started singing; it was something more lingering like, with one note in it that made Clarry wonder whether his guv'nor was playing it right.

There was a lot to learn about music. There was art for example, in tuning pianos. Anyway, it was good to hear his guv'nor tooting and to see him standing up to his meals again.

For if Halsey had ever known or surmised anything at all he now only wanted to forget it. More and more he was beginning to wonder whether he was not reading into his day and generation something that was not there. He had not actually seen with his eyes anybody sawing through the metal bolt of a car or pushing a harmless citizen into the river. He never would know now who had forced an entrance into his rooms, nor what they had expected to find there. Nowhere had he come into contact with a single solid fact, and besides, was not the war over? Did not everybody vehemently tell everybody else that the war was over? And was not the rest Cousin Ben's business? And what though Ben's hands did sometimes stick a bit, so that in the early twenties, eight or nine years after Halsey had returned from Canada to a darkened Euston Station, Ben was still pointing to the year 1914 and talking about War-guilt. What though, official histories and the vauntings and recriminations of compromised persons apart, hardly a book on the war could get itself published or a play put on? In another eight or ten years Ben would have bestirred himself, and everybody else's 1930 would be his 1918. And if he did choose to make a Hindenburg Line of that year, digging himself in as if history stopped there and nothing had happened since, what did Halsey care? He had peeped round the corner of those early Twenties and had seen as much as he wanted. He had not come into contact with a single personage, responsible mind or leader he would care to follow. Only the rank-and-file led by a lance-corporal had come his way. Such elements indeed might make the most formidable mischief of all, but anybody was welcome to his share of it. He didn't care if he never voted in an election as long as he lived. He wondered what it would be like to keep bees....

'Boss!' Clarry called.

The strains of the *Pathétique* ceased, and Halsey's bed creaked behind the curtain as he answered, 'What?'

'Ain't there a concert nor nothing on to-night?'

'Dunno. It'll be in the paper if there is.'

Clarry reached for the evening paper. He didn't mean the Holborn Empire; he meant a real concert, Mozart and that, not George Mozart, the comedian, and Nilbungeonleeds and things. These, too, might soon have to be his study.

'Feel like a bob's-worth?' he called under the curtain.

'What?' Halsey answered back.

'Ballad Concert. Queen's Hall.'

There was a pause, during which Hal's bed creaked again. First his legs appeared, then his face between the parted curtains.

'What's all this sudden crush on music about?' he asked.

'It ain't a sudden crush. I'm thinking of taking it up.'

Halsey yawned. 'All right. Get the car. We can come out if we don't like it,' he said, and Clarry went out to make ready the car.

Halsey yawned again. Yes, it was time he got a bit more out of himself. His eyes fell on Clarry's notebooks and the 'Outline of Company Law.' What a serious, hard-working, devoted little rascal he was! He cleaned, cooked, looked after the car, did everything; the only doubt Hal sometimes had was which of them was the master and which the man. Of course, he couldn't go on living here, but it would do till something turned up. He thought he had got the worst over. He wondered how Cuthbertson was liking Parkinsons' and whether his curiosity about maps and people had got him into trouble yet.

Clarry hooted outside, and Halsey, closing the door of the hut behind him, found him in the driver's seat. Now that he was out of work, he had a chauffeur. The Queen's Hall was not more than a quarter of an hour away, and there was a back-street to park the Morris in. Clarry saw to the parking, as he saw to everything, and Halsey was waiting for him at one of the entrances when he returned. Together they mounted the stairs to the amphitheatre.

The concert had begun, but they arrived during a pause between items, and sat down in the back row. Clarry frowned understandingly at the black Bechstein at the farther end of the platform; others might not know it, but he and his guv'nor knew all about the soundboard of that piano. It was made of a special kind of spruce, that was imported into this country by Companies, and Companies were made up of shareholders and shares. A bloke with long hair was touching his fiddle with the tip of his bow as he tuned up; fiddles were made of those portions of the tree that weren't big enough for the soundboards of pianos. Clarry turned to the programme and read the names of piano-makers, Broadwood, Steinway, Erard; he had letters from every one of them firms. But every man to his trade. A concert-programme was not a prospectus. It was a trade in itself to create shares, to be owned by shareholders, who would in the long run get their money back by means of these same long-haired blokes that played the classical music and the people who came to hear them. The fiddler began to play. His hair was all over the place as he swayed his body about and wagged his head, and Clarry would not have believed that human fingers could move so quickly. But he wished he would stop. It was the piano he wanted to hear, with its soundboard pinched by them Boches from Roumania. There was just as good in B.C., if only you could get people here in London to think so and act accordingly.

The fiddler stopped and bowed low, and there was clapping. The clapping, too, died down, a number was changed, and a woman came on to sing.

Halsey was not so much listening to the song as watching the singer. There was no real resemblance, but something about her, the setting of the eyes, perhaps, that phrenologists say means music and languages, reminded him of somebody. But that was all over, except that it would hardly do yet to think too much of the future with nobody to take her place. Serve him right for getting drunk. A fellow had no right to put himself in charge of a girl and then to go and get drunk. The worst of it was that he hadn't really been as drunk as all that. He had made an imbecile joke about women's backs, but he had said nothing about her back. But nothing on earth would ever make her believe that. So she must think the truth if she liked, that he had been standing in the doorway of her room while a cigar had burned among the carnations on the dressing-table. She must think the untruth, too, that he had told the other woman about it. Perhaps she had questioned the other woman. That didn't help Hal either. She had simply grown tired of him. That he should have got drunk was now quite the best thing that could have happened, since it made 'that' so fatally 'that.' Heigho!

Hal had not heard a note of the song, but prolonged applause broke out. Even Clarry was clapping; a singer's life must have its great moments, Halsey thought. And then the clapping died down to a hush. She was about to begin another song, without music, her hands lightly folded in front of her. Clarry, all ears, waited for the resonance of the first chord on the piano. Then came the voice:

'Take, oh, take those lips away
That so sweetly were forsworn ——'

Hal was listening now. Whose words were those? Shakespeare's, weren't they?

'And those eyes, the break of day,
Lights that do mislead the morn ——'

Poor old Shakespeare, who must have felt things ten times as deeply as anybody else! Who had used him so?

'But my kisses bring again ——'

Quietly Hal was folding his programme. But as it folded, the memories unfolded. What was the good of pretending? They would always be there. Things that other people did were different when she did them. Deep under all the tormented rest, there *was* that little bit of heaven that he had seen at first, only to lose it at the last. It *was* the struggle of her soul to the surface of a ruined time that had made her face as he had first seen it, a lotus floating on a deep evening pool. Something in her, like radium, was indestructible, and he might die, but not it nor his knowledge of it. So why this pretence of forgetting, when he could fold that memory like wings about himself, too? He whispered to Clarry:

'Shall we make a move after this?'

'Seals of love, but sealed in vain,
Sealed in vain.'

'Ready?'

They made their way to the door as the storm of clapping broke out again. The song had no second verse.

THE END

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